

2-12-2008

Culturally Relevant Professional Development: An Examination of Race, Practice, and Self through an Africa-American Teacher Study Group

Charnita V. West

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ACCEPTANCE PAGE

This dissertation, CULTURALLY RELEVANT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: AN EXAMINATION OF RACE, PRACTICE, AND SELF THROUGH AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN TEACHER STUDY GROUP, by CHARNITA V. WEST, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chair, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty. The Dean of the College of Education concurs.

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ABSTRACT

CULTURALLY RELEVANT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: AN EXAMINATION OF RACE, PRACTICE, AND SELF THROUGH AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN TEACHER STUDY GROUP

by
Charnita V. West

This naturalistic investigation examined how the implementation of a teacher study group assisted African-American teachers in instituting culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1994) coined the term *culturally relevant pedagogy* to address the need for developing and implementing authentic methods for teaching African-American students. However, teachers also need opportunities to be engaged in learning experiences that will facilitate their growth in this area. Although teacher study groups are a popular form of professional development (Birchak et al., 1998), research on teacher study groups designed exclusively for African-American teachers is absent from the literature.

Informed by tenets of sociocultural theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), critical race theory (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001), and feminist theory (Belenky et al., 1997; Collins, 2000), this study involved participants in what I have termed *culturally relevant professional development*. Research questions included (1) What are the characteristics of an African-American teacher study group? (2) What are the topics and themes discussed in an African-American teacher study group that is focused on “culturally relevant pedagogy”? (3) How does participation in a teacher study group inform the participants’ views about (a) literacy and the literacy curriculum and (b) their teaching practices? (4)

According to the study group participants, how does the African-American teacher study group compare to other professional development experiences in facilitating their growth as learners? (5) How might the participation of a school administrator in a teacher study group assist teachers in their professional growth?

Data sources included audiotaped and videotaped study group sessions, field notes from study group sessions, in-depth interviews, field notes from classroom observations, participant journals, and a researcher's journal. Constant comparison and grounded theory methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) guided data analysis. Methodological rigor was established using criteria for trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants reported that culturally relevant professional development is essential to address the specific needs of African-American students. The teacher study group inquiry centered on ways to support African-American male students, ways to address curriculum mandates, the need for administrative support and parental involvement, the importance of spirituality, the need for collegiality and building relationships, and ways to challenge the status quo.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: AN
EXAMINATION OF RACE, PRACTICE, AND SELF THROUGH
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A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the
Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Teaching and Learning
in
the Department of Middle-Secondary Education and Instructional Technology
in
the College of Education
Georgia State University

Atlanta, Georgia
2007

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my mother, Vanita L. Wilkerson, who gave me 20 years of tough love and support. You were my first teacher and I thank you for your willingness to oppose bureaucratic policies when educators did not understand my unique learning style or those of your academically challenged students. People say that my passion for educating the “underdog” mirrors yours, and I hope that I am a fraction of the educator that you were.

To my father, Dr. Nathaniel C. West, who had to abruptly assume the roles of father, comforter, and confidant. Thank you for nurturing my love of reading with the many trips to bookstores and libraries. Thank you for challenging me to comprehend the words of Maya Angelou’s *Phenomenal Woman* during a time when I wanted to give up. I hope that you are as proud to be my father as I am to be your daughter.

To my baby sister, T’Yanna, who, after our tragic loss, boldly told me that I was obligated to return to college and graduate. Your love, encouragement, and support have been consistent in helping me achieve my personal and professional goals. I love you!!

To my beautiful nieces, Jordaine and Amarya, who kept asking me when I would be finished so that we can play. Last one to the sliding board is a rotten egg!

To Dr. Dana L. Fox, Dr. Gertrude Tinker Sachs, Dr. Joyce E. Many, Dr. Eric Freeman, Dr. Peggy Albers, Dr. Renee N. Shackelford, Dr. Zaheerah Shakir-Khan, Dr. Willa B. Blaylock, and Ms. Tawni E. Taylor for cultivating potential in me when I could not see it in myself. Each of you, through your leadership, allowed me to be myself without extinguishing my fire. You viewed my audaciousness as passion, my stubbornness as determination, and my eagerness as dedication. This project is truly a fruit of your labor.

To Frances B. Pope (my other mother), Linda Weiskoff, Laconduas Freeman, Rena McElrath, Yolanda Anderson, Ebony Cobb, Lois Mayes, Erika Sills, Pamela Allen-Thornton, Jerica Creswell, Kim Williams, Alda Blakeney-Wright, the “Girls Night In” crew, Sabrina Tillman, Rita Williams, and Kim Coady who listened to me brag, fuss, cry, and the go through the gamut of emotions. You prayed for me and with me, and your love helped me through this process. No one could ask for a better support system.

To the wonderful teachers at Flagg and Grant Elementary Schools who thought enough of this project to devote hours to making my dream a reality.

Last but not least, I am grateful to God for bringing me to and through this experience. I have felt Your presence throughout my life, and I hope that I continue to be a recipient of Your grace and mercy. Thank you for not giving me “more than I could bear.”

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAVE	African-American Vernacular English
CO	Classroom Observation
CRPD	Culturally Relevant Professional Development
EIP	Early Intervention Program
FG	Focus Group
FN	Field Notes
HBCU	Historically Black College and University
I1 or I2	Interview #1 or Interview #2
IEP	Individualized Education Plan
PJ	Participant Journal
PLU	Professional Learning Unit
RJ	Researcher's Journal
SST	Student Support Team
TSG	Teacher Study Group

CHAPTER 1

EASE ON DOWN THE ROAD

Ease on down ...

Sometimes teaching can be very lonely. ...I mean, you're in your classroom, teaching your students. Sometimes I wonder if I'm doing the right thing. ... Do they [the students] really get it [the concept being taught] or are they doing a good job of remembering what I am saying so that they can repeat it back to me on a test? Sharing strategies today is reaffirming what I do in the classroom, because many times I wonder if I am the only person who questions if I am truly making a difference.

--Imani, a first-grade teacher

Imani (a pseudonym) was one of nine African-American teachers who volunteered to participate with me in a ground-breaking pilot research project in the literacy field (West, 2005). These nine elementary educators understood that the curriculum that they were responsible for teaching was not aligned with the academic needs of the majority of their predominantly African-American students. As the Assistant Principal and instructional leader in their school and an African-American educator myself, I sought ways to support these teachers as they worked together to improve their teaching of African-American students. Over time, we discussed critical issues primarily related to the literacy education of African-American students within the context of new state and federal educational mandates. Within our school were African-American students who understood the language of power or Standard American English – what Geneva Smitherman (2003) refers to as the “language of wider communication” – who

were already able to expertly navigate between their home language and the more formal codes required at school. These students were not the source of frustration for the nine teachers who participated in my pilot study. Instead, the teachers constantly sought support from administrators and counselors for their work with students who had a history of low-performance in school, lacked motivation, or displayed an aversion to learning. The students who seemed to be disgruntled with these teachers' classroom practices (all African-American and the majority of them male) continually caused classroom disturbances that eventually earned them a visit to my office for discipline. These students became the focus of meaningful conversations and inquiry in which their teachers and I engaged in a teacher study group. Our dialogue revealed that teachers wanted permission to abandon those elements of the prescribed curriculum that did not accurately portray people of color (i.e., slavery is not synonymous with indentured servitude) in favor of resources that would fill our students with pride associated with being descendants of African kings and queens.

In 1939, Frank Baum's (1900) classic *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was turned into a screenplay and major motion picture. This cast consisted of European-American characters who "follow[ed] the yellow brick road" in order to see "The Wizard" who possessed the power to improve a character flaw that each of them possessed (LeRoy & Fleming, 1939). In 1978, the African-American version of the movie debuted, and these characters had to "ease on down the road" in order to meet with "The Wiz" who also held the fate of the characters in his hands (Cohen & Lumet, 1978). Although the premises of both movies were the same, the characters, style, and language were very different to appeal to the intended audience. A similar principle can be applied to the teaching and

learning of African-American students. Teachers of African-American students cannot merely follow prescribed paths established by departments of education; these teachers need instructional techniques that will assist them in providing culturally relevant pedagogy with ease.

My role as an administrator in the elementary school described above is one of support for my principal, teachers, students, and parents. If student achievement is threatened for any reason (i.e., discipline concerns or poor academic performance), I must act swiftly to help teachers develop a plan of action to steer students in along the “right” path. After an academic year filled with discipline referrals and discouraged teachers, I was introduced to Delpit and Dowdy’s (2002) edited work, *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom* during a summer graduate course on diversity in literacy and literature. I had an epiphany while reading this text – when we focused solely on correcting our students’ home language without also allowing opportunities for that home language to be used in the classroom, we were implicitly telling them that they were deficient. This may have accounted for the resistance (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001) that the students showed in academic settings. After speaking to my major advisor, who was also the instructor of the course, I decided that I would organize a voluntary teacher study group to invite teachers to explore theory and pedagogy related to language variation and to renew teachers’ belief in themselves and their students. I realized that my vision for student success could not be realized without the help of powerful, articulate educators; therefore, I depended on my university professors, my advisor, Lisa Delpit, and Joanne Kilgore Dowdy to help me. As a result of this preliminary study, ten educators (including myself) began to transform the way that

we viewed educational policy, power, and our roles as practitioners. Each of us in the teacher study group relied on one another to receive reassurance that we were not alone in this uphill struggle to educate our African-American students – their lives depended on our conversations about culturally relevant pedagogy that would provide us with specific strategies to address students' needs. At that particular time, developing a pioneer study was not apparent to us.

Our quest to determine whether or not our efforts should be concentrated solely on student mastery of curriculum standards resurrected the historical debate between two prominent African-American educators, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. Washington, born to slaves in 1856, believed that freed slaves would not benefit from learning history and philosophy if they would not be able to afford shelter and food. Instead, education should equip African-Americans with skills or trades that would allow them to be able to provide for themselves and their families (McCabe, 2004). As president of Tuskegee Institute, Washington promoted vocational education for all students which was considered nothing more than manual labor by the African-American scholar, W.E.B. DuBois (Bailey, 2005).

Born in 1868 in Massachusetts, DuBois was far removed from the struggles of former slaves, but he did not escape the cruelty of racism. DuBois, the first African-American to receive the Doctor of Philosophy degree from Harvard University, aligned himself with elite scholars and believed that African-Americans would not pursue a higher education if they only focused on developing technical skills. DuBois also felt that vocational education was important in certain contexts; however, African-American colleges were necessary to produce African-American teachers for African-American

students (Bailey, 2005). Only through higher education could African-Americans contend with racist practices that would become extremely problematic in the twentieth century (McGill, 2005).

Washington founded Tuskegee Institute to give Black college students a place that would provide them with a vocational education that he felt was vital for their survival in a world that would continue to relegate them to an inferior status (Bailey, 2005). DuBois was very critical of Washington's assertion that education for Blacks should focus on the development of menial skills that were devoid of critical thinking. DuBois believed that his Harvard degree was sufficient evidence to demonstrate that Blacks could compete intellectually with their White counterparts. The only way, according to DuBois, that Blacks could demonstrate their academic aptitude was to aspire to become more than skilled laborers (McCabe, 2004).

The same racist ideals and practices in education prevalent in the late 19th century are still present in modern day curriculum development and pedagogy, but the dilemma for those of us who want to become change agents becomes can we talk about hegemonic practices or should we for that matter? Would our dialogue make us anti-American or would ignoring the fact indeed be revolting to our ancestors who, before integration, demanded quality education for African-American students, demonstrated solidarity, and professed a love of being "Black and proud"? Who are we, as Colored, Negro, Black, or African-American educators to challenge centuries of oppression when the debate of Washington and DuBois has not been resolved among scholars within our community? Identifying the purpose(s) for educating African-American students created dissention between DuBois and Washington during the 19th century (McCabe, 2004) and is the

source of confusion and/or frustration for African-American educators today (Foster, 1997). Participants in a pilot study conducted by West (2005) believed that African-American teachers should set high expectations for the academic performance of their African-American students; however, many of them revealed that some of their students (whose ages range from 5-10 years old) should abandon their desire to explore the college preparatory track offered in high school in favor of the vocational/technical diploma that would be more commensurate with their abilities. Conversations to address the questions concerning our dilemma must occur in order for African-American teachers to (1) identify the purpose of education and (2) define our role in ensuring that African-American students obtain the skills necessary that will allow them to make informed decisions concerning their lives. Unless dialogue among African-American teachers is included as a component of professional development, teachers will continue to convince themselves that they are advocates for African-American students when, in actuality, they are instruments to perpetuate negative stereotypes and reinforce the status quo.

Statement of the Research Problem

Copenhaver and McIntyre (1992) assert that professional development and systematic reflection on experience can be a positive influence on the effectiveness of teachers. School districts that provide continuous professional learning for their teachers have the most effective academic programs. Providing opportunities for new and veteran teachers to collaborate and exchange ideas concerning methodological and pedagogical practices allows educators to expand their individual knowledge base. These authors also propose that teachers can become more receptive to new instructional initiatives when

allowed to pursue professional growth through courses and workshops that they felt were realistic and practical.

Teacher study groups are becoming a preferred form of professional development in many school districts throughout the United States because of the interactive format and the myriad of positive outcomes that result from collaborating on issues and concerns specific to their respective schools (Birchak, Connor, Crawford, Kahn, Kaser, Turner, & Short, 1998). Birchak et al. also propose that teacher study groups encourage collegiality among educators while simultaneously providing an arena for discussion and feedback concerning various instructional and personal issues. In addition to the research conducted by Birchak et al., others have also documented the manner in which curricular conversations transform the classroom practice of English and reading teachers (Brooke, et al., 2005; Florio-Ruane & Raphael, 2001; Mills, Jennings, Donnelly, & Mueller, 2001; Raphael, et al., 2001; Raphael, 2001; and Short, 1993). Recent educational reform has placed teachers in a compromising position. The educational community asks teachers to “think outside [of] the box” while insisting that curriculum objectives be taught in a prescribed order. The autonomy of teachers is also infringed upon through the careful scrutiny of lesson plans and systematic observations to ensure that teachers are “maximizing classroom instruction.” Research has focused on the need for students to become critical thinkers who are permitted to share their thoughts and ideas verbally with their peers; however, the same attention should be devoted to providing teachers with these same opportunities to engage in discourse with colleagues about issues of importance to them. Providing opportunities for novice and veteran African-American teachers to collaborate and exchange ideas concerning methodological and pedagogical

practices will allow them to jointly identify solutions to address some of the academic concerns that they have about their students. Research conducted by literacy educators such as Birchak et al. (1998), Short (1993), Clark (2001), and Florio-Ruane and Raphael (2001) have documented the manner in which curricular conversations in a teacher study group have transformed the classroom practices of English and reading teachers. Although teacher study groups are a popular form of professional development, no studies have been conducted regarding African-American teacher study groups.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, I investigated how the implementation of a teacher study group supported female, African-American teachers' sense of self-efficacy, their conceptions of literacy, their teaching of literacy, and their own professional growth. Secondly, I examined how my position as an instructional leader supported teachers as they engaged in this type of professional learning opportunity. Since I conducted a pilot study with a similar study group (West, 2005), I utilized what I learned from that study to help me design and implement the current study. Data collection methods associated with qualitative inquiry enabled me to accurately depict the participants' perspectives and pedagogical approaches as they reflected on themselves as practitioners within sociopolitical contexts.

Significance of the Study

Absent from the literature on teacher study groups is the impact of this form of professional development on the pedagogy of African-American teachers. Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995, 2000) has written extensively on what she has termed *culturally relevant pedagogy*. She defined the basic premise of this teaching style as one that is

“committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). Students are not alone in their need for empowerment. Teachers also need to be empowered through their participation in teaching and learning activities that I have termed *culturally relevant professional development*.

Definition of Terms

African-American/Black – All persons of African descent born in America. For the purpose of this study, African-American and Black will be used interchangeably to refer to African-American people.

African-American females – Women (born female) of African descent born in America. This term is not a unified concept, nor is this a monolithic group due to different life experiences, world views, and values of each woman (Collins, 2000).

Black (non-American) – Persons of African descent born in countries, territories, or provinces other than America.

Culturally relevant professional development – Learning opportunities for teachers that focus on the specific needs of the students whom they teach.

Hegemonic practices/ideals – Social or cultural domination of one group over another. This term can also refer to the subconscious participation of the oppressed in their oppression; however, I will use the former definition for the purposes of this study.

Marginalized students – Students perceived as powerless in society based on socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, etc.

Professional learning (traditionally known as staff development) – Classes and/or workshops that allow teachers to actively participate in becoming more proficient in their craft.

School administrators – Principals and Assistant Principals assigned to a school site.

School leadership team – Comprised of school administrators, counselors, and teacher-leaders who make decisions concerning certain aspects of teaching and learning.

Teacher study group – A cadre of teachers who use collaboration and current educational research as tools to improve their ability to be “effective” in the classroom.

Assumptions

This study was conducted with the following assumptions in mind: (1) teachers are professionals; (2) teachers who participate in meaningful professional learning activities will positively impact student learning; (3) novice and veteran educators need opportunities to engage in dialogic experiences; (4) African-American teachers need more support to meet the academic needs of African-American students; (5) as the facilitator of the study group and instructional leader in the school, I value collaboration; and (6) each student at Grant Elementary School (pseudonyms are used for names of all persons and places associated with this study) belongs to every teacher – no child is a single teacher’s problem.

Theoretical Framework

The tenets of sociocultural theory, feminist theory, and critical race theory (CRT) provided the theoretical framework for this study. The premise of each theory may be used individually to support the rationale for teacher study group implementation; however, when analyzed collectively, all three have overlapping principles that strengthen the applicability of each to this study. Sociocultural theory in education supports instituting teacher study groups (TSGs) in schools throughout the nation as a learning tool that provides educators with a vehicle to forge strong relationships with

colleagues through engaging in meaningful dialogue about current issues and trends that affect their performance in the classroom. Teacher study groups also have the propensity to strengthen instructional practice and address other topics of interest to the group (Lefever-Davis, Wilson, Moore, Kent, & Hopkins, 2003). The importance of conversation and “voice” (Dixon & Rousseau, 2006, p. 35) are also major components of both critical race theory (CRT) and feminist thought. In this study, female African-American teachers were engaged in conversations that acknowledged their “personal and community experiences ...as sources of knowledge” (Dixon & Rousseau, 2006, p. 35) and asked to closely examine professional practices that may heighten their awareness of hegemony in education. Another commonality that unifies sociocultural theory, feminist theory, and critical race theory is the goal of systemic change. Sociocultural theory stresses the importance of conversations as a method for educators to approach teaching and learning from a different perspective; feminist theory and CRT also seek to evoke a positive change in the way that society views and treats women and ethnic minorities, respectively. If participants begin to challenge the status quo, one of the goals of CRT (Tate, 1997) and feminist theory (Collins, 2000) will be realized. Figure 1 diagrams the similarities and differences of the theoretical frameworks that undergirded the study.

Sociocultural Theory

The relevance of teacher study groups to the field of education is grounded in sociocultural theory which is linked to both social cognitive learning theory and discourse theory. Sociocultural theory is based upon Vygotsky’s (1986) social constructivist theory. Social constructivism proposes that students’ interactions with teachers and/or peers in social learning activities facilitate academic growth faster than activities that require

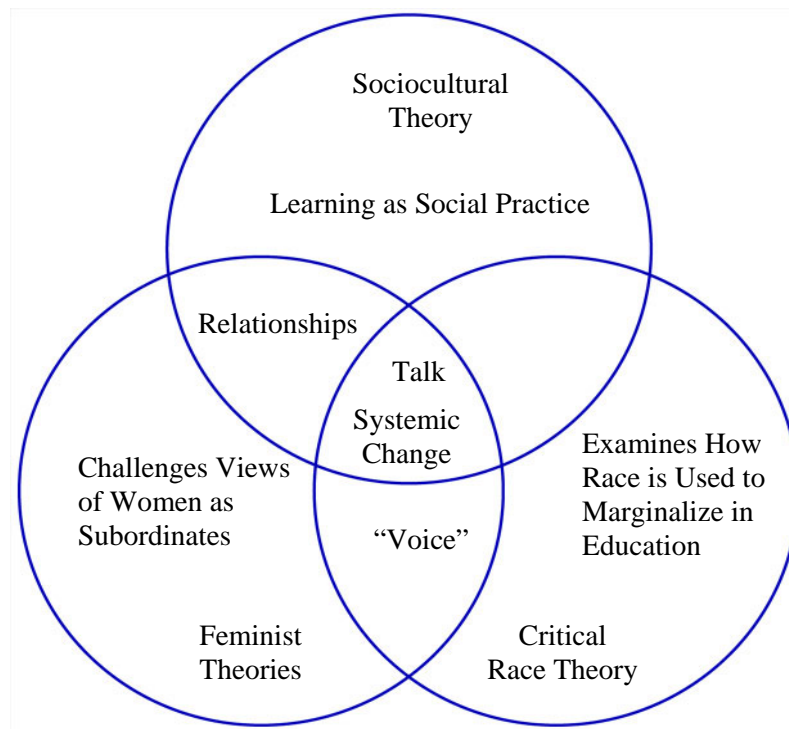


Figure 1. Diagram of the interconnectedness of the theoretical frameworks.

independent practice. Adult learners also learn best when they have opportunities to discuss and share their thoughts with others. Sociocultural theory emphasizes that cognition is not an independent skill, but a social practice that Lave and Wenger (1991) have called situated learning. The components of situated learning include the following: (1) the learner participates in a community of practice, (2) the learner's presence is legitimate in the eyes of the members of the community, and (3) initially, the learner's participation is peripheral, gradually expanding in scope until the learner achieves full-fledged membership in the community. The theory of situated learning places the learner as participant within a community of practice, and learning most resembles an apprenticeship that Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). LPP ensures that the learner is actively involved in the learning process and this

process is devoid of teaching isolated skills that may not be of interest or use to the learner. The essence of LPP is that learning takes place within the community where the knowledge is used, as opposed to traditional teaching techniques that reduce knowledge to a “decontextualized” process (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 40). When expert and novice learners participate together to construct knowledge in literary discussions, the text is viewed as an instrument that prompts engagement and discussion and the participants themselves possess the knowledge and facts about the topic(s) to be discussed (Applebee, 1996).

Sociocultural theory also recognizes that learning must be meaningful and contextualized for students, regardless of their age and experience (Forman, Minick, & Stone, 1993). Learning in a sociocultural environment includes the facilitation of language and literacy development, contextualizing teaching and learning, complex thinking, and instructional conversations (Dalton, 1998). In order for sociocultural theory to be implemented, persons must be engaged in dialogic practices common in teacher study groups. Bahktin (1986) states that an individual’s speech is an “assimilation” (p. 89) of words heard by others. Because words are a conglomeration of thoughts and feelings of others, verbal exchanges in a social context are important to cognitive development. Discourse theory, which is embedded in sociocultural theory, focuses on the impact of language on social relationships, knowledge, identity, and power in classrooms. Gee (2004) claims that two types of discourses exist. One type of discourse (with a lowercase *d*) is simply using language as a communication tool, whereas Discourse (with a capital *D*) is a person’s “identity kit” (p. 124) that embeds all of his or her social identity, beliefs, and attitudes. Gee (2004) and Dillon and Moje (1998) claim

that discourse has a mode of power that includes and excludes persons from participating in certain social activities of which he or she is or is not a member. Discourse, in its exclusionary form, perpetuates hegemonic ideals as certain people and groups are prohibited from engaging in conversations taking place outside of their social and/or academic arena. Discourse as a mode that promotes inclusion allows conversations to occur in a non-threatening or intimidating environment. As teachers attempt to understand the discourses of their students, they will be involved in Discourses of schooling that may contradict with their teaching methodologies. When teachers have conversations with their peers in teacher study groups, they are engaging in “discourse and exploration, talking and listening, question[ing], argu[ing], speculat[ing], and sharing” (Belenky, Clinch, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997, p. 144).

Teacher study groups have been instituted by school districts in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Sociocultural theory is perpetuated through teacher study groups as they collaborate with one another, critique and reflect on current pedagogy, share experiences, support other teachers, and become more knowledgeable about their craft. The structure of teacher study groups promotes the social aspects of learning through language and talk. Halliday (2003) states that learning language, learning about language, and learning through language occurs in sociopolitical contexts. In the case of teacher study groups, language becomes the catalyst for creating change as the participants learn about the topic and themselves in a social manner. Teacher study groups also give participants an environment where their opinions and insights are validated by other professionals (Brooke et al., 2005). Establishing relationships with colleagues can provide teachers with a source of energy that the demands of education

may steal from them (Graves, 2001). The research of Mills et al. (2001) supports a “culture of inquiry” (p. 27) as teachers in their study group reported that they appreciated the nature of curricular conversations. Teachers who are able to examine their teaching practice in the presence of other educators are able to foster relationships with their colleagues that otherwise may not be an option for them.

Feminist Theory – “And Ain’t I a Woman?”

In 1851, activist Sojourner Truth posed the most important question related to Black feminist theory at a women’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio. Her question, “And ain’t I a woman?” (as cited in Collins, 2000, p. 14) was a mantra echoed by all females who believed that “woman” was a culturally constructed term that privileged some females while excluding others. The disparities in the treatment of White and Black women, during this particular period in history, was also noticed by illiterate women such as Sojourner Truth who understood that Black women were subjected to hardships because of their gender *and* race that their White counterparts were not (Collins, 2000). Black women challenged discriminatory practices that were based on gender and race at least one century after White women established their own movement for gender equality.

Scholars credit Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1792 publication of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as one of the earliest feminist writings due to the author’s public position on the social and political domination of women. Although the text was published in England, the social structure (especially the position and treatment of women) in Great Britain and the United States were similar (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2000). The writings of Wollstonecraft and public outcry from other females concerning

their unfair treatment eventually morphed into what is known throughout the world today as feminist theory. bell hooks (1994) defines theory as a technique that assist people (in this case women) “grasp what is happening around and within” (p. 59) them. Kolmar and Bartkowski (2000) describe feminist theory as “a body of writing that attempts to describe, explain, and analyze the conditions of women’s lives” (p. 2). In order for women to understand their world and challenge negative stereotypes associated with being female, they must be prepared to confront those who believe that the role of women is limited to living in the shadows of men as wives, sex objects, and mothers (DuBois, Kelly, Kennedy, Korsmeyer, & Robinson, 1985).

Feminist theory not only exposes the injustices of women’s lives, but this body of research also seeks to propose realistic solutions that will “transform social relations in order to overcome women’s subordination” (Meyers, 1997, p. 1). Women have expressed their desire for equality through social movements, political activism, and intellectual expression that presents a social reality from a woman’s perspective (Harding & Norberg, 2005). In addition, feminist scholarship challenges research methods that make generalizations about women based on information gathered by men. As a result, women’s epistemologies or “ways of knowing” (Belenky et al., 1997) are “crucial to feminist theory” (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2000, p. 37).

Belenky et al. (1997) drew upon the cognitive development research of William Perry, Carol Gilligan, and Jean Piaget to form a theory that describes how women make meaning of their lives and view the world. Belenky et al. described women’s cognitive development in terms of identity (self); the interrelationship of the self with others (voice); and the understanding of truth and knowledge (mind) by observing 135 women

whose backgrounds ranged from those who were enrolled in local colleges and universities to those who were referred to the study by local social service agencies. Their interviews and interactions with the participants resulted in the development of five epistemological perspectives: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge.

Silent women were characterized by their isolation, fearfulness, and acceptance of the status quo. These women lacked confidence in their ability to learn from experience and had no sense of connection with others or with a community. Received knowers felt that people with positional power were the single source of Truth. In order for received knowers to acquire knowledge, they must listen to authority figures and memorize information. Dependency on others rendered these women from being able to construct knowledge. In contrast, subjective knowers relied on their personal feelings and experiences in their quest for the truth. As a result, these women distrusted logic, analysis, or any other abstract process used in a learning situation. The emphasis of procedural knowing was on procedures and skills that were necessary to process the accuracy of external truth and authority. Procedural knowledge was subdivided into separate knowing and connected knowing. Separate knowers refuted all knowledge claims until the claims were analyzed through critical analysis. Connected knowers attempted to understand the phenomenon being studied and felt that the most trustworthy knowledge came from personal experience. Women who constructed their knowledge felt as if the knower was key to what was learned. They tended to be more reflective, articulate, and cared about people around them (Belenky et al., 1997). Cited as feminist text, *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind* highlights the

impact of women's experiences (which are different from that of men) on their development.

Regardless of women's epistemologies, feminist theory recognizes that women's experiences are different from men and must be reported in the literature, respected, and valued. Although Black and White women have gender in common, the life experiences of these two groups are very different and have their respective bodies of research outlining their specific demands for social, economic, and political equality. Feminist theory examines discriminatory practices based upon gender; however, Black feminist theory takes the ideals of feminist theory one step further – this theory contends with the African-American woman's "double oppression" (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 19) – sexism and racism.

Contemporary Black American feminists have identified the following central themes in Black feminism: (1) the presentation of an alternative social construct for now and the future based on African-American women's lived experiences; (2) a commitment to fighting against race and gender inequality across differences of class, age, sexual orientation, and ethnicity; (3) recognition of Black women's legacy of struggle; (4) the promotion of Black female empowerment through voice, visibility and self definition; and (5) a belief in the interdependence of thought and action (Collins, 2000).

Education is one of the main determinants of social class and social class accounts for most of the disunity that exists among women. Those of higher social classes tend to systematically dominate and exclude those of lower social classes, irrespective of their gender and race (Ngwainmbi, 2004). With this in mind, African-American women are neither a monolithic group, nor is this a unified concept. The experiences and perceptions

of one group under investigation should not be generalized to speak for all African-Americans who are female. Making assumptions based on the thoughts of one group has propensity to perpetuate more harm than good.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

The third theoretical lens that informed this study is critical race theory. Critical race theory emerged in the midst of the Civil Rights movement in the United States from minority law students who wanted to challenge the ways in which race and power were constructed in the American legal system (Crenshaw, 1995). Solórzano and Bernal (2001) argue that CRT “challenge[s] the dominant discourse on race and racism as they relate to education by examining how educational theory and practice are used to subordinate and marginalize...” (p. 312). CRT is based on five ideals: (1) race and racism is permanent and other forms of discrimination (i.e., gender and class) may be included as a category of CRT; (2) CRT denounces claims of colorblindness that attempts disguise power and privileges attributed to the dominant culture; (3) social injustice is improved by empowering marginalized groups; (4) the experiences of students of color are legitimate and should be respected; and (5) race and racism must be identified in the curriculum (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). CRT is committed to scholarship; however, the main goal of this movement is social transformation that will end the oppression of marginalized groups. CRT researchers note that this theory is not an attack on White people, rather it is an assault on political structures that privileges some while excluding others because of race (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006).

Delgado (1990) argued that race is a pervasive component of American culture. Critical race scholarship acknowledges that knowledge is powerful, and power is retained

by those who are unwilling to relinquish control. Delgado also believed that the notion of colorblindness is a fallacy because this nation began on the premise that the color of one's skin was the one distinguishing feature that separated those who possessed authority and those who did not. Ethnic minorities will always, Delgado contends, experience acts of blatant and subtle racism, while these acts are rarely apparent to Whites (Delgado, 1990). Although critical race theory was initiated to contend with discriminatory practices on a macro political level, this theory can also be applied in the educational sector as well.

Ladson-Billings (1999) and Tate (1997) agree that principles of CRT have significant implications for educational research. CRT explores various aspects of education such as “policy and practice, educational leadership, curriculum and instruction, and student perspectives” (Lynn, Benigno, Williams, Park, & Mitchell, 2006, p. 19). Social transformation in schools is necessary in order to change existing structures and/or procedures that prohibit all children from receiving equal opportunities to learn. Delgado's (1990) research paid particular attention to the correlation between knowledge and power, and property ownership has always been a symbol of power in America (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) maintain that “intellectual property” (p. 53) is a form of property ownership that includes school curriculum and resources. Kozol (1991) outlined the disparities of schools located in affluent neighborhoods (and thus higher property taxes) as opposed schools that were located in poorer areas. An abundance of resources were available to students whose neighbors could boast high socioeconomic status, whereas the poorer schools had little or no access to computers or courses that would adequately prepare them for higher learning. If

Delgado's assertion is true, schools attended by America's poor children will continue to produce generations of powerless citizens who will be inept in acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary for them to attain equity and equality. Students who become ignorant adults will remain silenced and unable to tell their individual stories and share their knowledge.

Counterstorytelling or voice scholarship has been used by people of color in order to heal wounds of racial discrimination (Tate, 1997). Counterstories are important to challenge stories told by the dominant group that suggest that their superior status to minority groups is acceptable and normal. In a school setting, CRT can be "used as a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006, p. 35) as students are permitted to provide their perspectives on their educational experiences. Because the ultimate goal of CRT is social transformation, these counterstories must be used to evoke social action that will improve the curriculum and the conditions of schools. Bell (1980), one of the leading scholars of the CRT movement, contends that the voices of Blacks do not always "fall on deaf ears." His interest convergence principle maintains the ideas of minorities have merit when these ideas are aligned with goals of the majority, "the interests of Blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites" (p. 523). Dixson and Rousseau (2006) elaborate on this notion by maintaining that "whites will not agree to any measure aimed at social justice if that measure threatens their own status" (p. 64).

Williams (2004) states, "race is a pervasive and powerful force that organizes culture and society, and we do our students no favors by pretending it doesn't affect our

lives, including our perceptions and uses of literacy” (p. 164). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) assert that poor school performance by African-American students is influenced by “institutional and structural racism” (p. 54) that only allows them to be successful outside of the classroom. Teachers of these students must understand and discuss the covert and overt political dynamics that affect their teaching practices through vehicles such as teacher study groups. When African-American teachers’ voices are heard during their participation in teacher study groups, the ideals of critical race theory are promoted as they speak freely without fear of remaining politically correct.

Overview of the Study and Research Questions

This qualitative investigation examined how the implementation of a teacher study group assisted African-American teachers in instituting culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1994) coined the term “culturally relevant pedagogy” to address the need for teachers to develop and implement authentic methods for teaching African-American students. However, teachers also need opportunities to be engaged in a myriad of learning experiences that will facilitate their growth and knowledge in this area. The voluntary participants in the study, all African-American teachers currently assigned to an elementary school located outside a major southeastern city, were involved in what I have termed *culturally relevant professional development* through a teacher study group which focused on carefully selected professional readings to stimulate discussion and professional growth. As the Assistant Principal and instructional leader in the school and an African-American educator myself, I served as the facilitator of the teacher study group and a mentor to these prospective school leaders.

In order to determine the impact of a teacher study group on African-American teachers, five research questions guided this investigation:

1. What are the characteristics of an African-American teacher study group?
2. What are the topics and themes discussed in an African-American teacher study group that is focused on “culturally relevant pedagogy”?
3. How does participation in a teacher study group inform the participants’ views about (a) literacy and the literacy curriculum and (b) their teaching practices?
4. According to the study group participants, how does the African-American teacher study group compare to other professional development experiences in facilitating their growth as learners?
5. How might the participation of a school administrator in a teacher study group assist teachers in their professional growth?

In order for the research questions to be addressed, participants were involved in a series of discourses around key texts centering on educating African-American students and their personal experiences in education.

Data sources included audiotaped and videotaped study group sessions; in-depth interviews; field notes from study group sessions and classroom observations; participant journals; and a researcher’s journal. Constant comparison and grounded theory methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) guided data analysis. Findings should contribute significant knowledge about the features and potential of African-American teacher study groups as a means of support and professional growth for teachers.

Ease on Down ... Down the Road

Educators have been following yellow brick roads that “the Wizard” – lawmakers and state boards of education – have mandated for decades. However, we need to remember that the true Wizards are perhaps not those persons located on the periphery of our daily experiences; the Wizards are teachers who create magical learning experiences for students each day in their individual Emerald Cities (places throughout the school building where learning takes place). African-American teachers, unlike Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, must navigate their students’ learning by “eas[ing] on down the road” because “following the yellow brick road” has often proven to be detrimental to the African-American experience. Through conversations and dialogue with colleagues in a teacher study group, I hoped African-American teachers would discover that they already possess the heart, courage, and intellect to provide their students with the successful educational experiences that no one else can give them.

Chapter One provided the background information to justify the importance of the study, but other relevant literature concerning themes that are important to a comprehensive understanding of the investigation are discussed in the Chapter Two. Chapter Three outlines the research design and methods employed to address the guiding research questions. The participants’ early experiences with literacy, journeys to education, and an overview of the teacher study group are chronicled in Chapter 4. The next chapter details the impact of teacher study groups on teaching, learning, and school leadership. The study concludes with a discussion of topics and themes that crystallized from the data and introduces additional research to support the implementation of teacher

study groups in schools. Chapter 6 also provides suggestions for other researchers to consider when exploring teacher study groups.

CHAPTER 2

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Don't you carry nothin' that might be a load. Come on, ease on down, ease on down...down the road. (from The Wiz)

Today, unreasonable voices outside our profession are clamoring to tell us how and what to teach. People who have little idea how children learn to read and write are speaking out loudly, bombarding the media with simplistic "quick fixes" and loud criticism of sound educational practices. (Routman, 1996, p. xv)

The review of the literature in this chapter will focus on six interrelated areas. The chapter opens with a historical review of policies and practices devoted to educating African-Americans living in southern states and recent research devoted to urban education. Next, a discussion of the influences of current national legislation on schooling is presented. Following this section, culturally relevant pedagogy and principles of multicultural education are discussed through a review of key studies. Fourth, an overview of teacher study groups is outlined to define teacher study groups as a professional learning tool that can be used to facilitate discourse and address issues of concern for all participants. Fifth, a discussion of Bandura's (1985) research on social cognition and teacher efficacy outlines the importance of motivation for teaching and learning. The chapter concludes with educational leadership research that focuses on the impact of administrators on authentic professional development, and female leaders.

History of African-American Education

In her forward to Foster's (1997) *Black Teachers on Teaching*, Lisa Delpit recalled a speaking engagement in which she shared fond memories of being educated in all Black schools in the segregated South with conference participants. Delpit's nostalgic depiction was met with opposition from a White educator who claimed, "If segregated Black schools were so wonderful, then why did Black people fight so hard to integrate?" (p. ix). Delpit, like many other Black scholars such as hooks (1994), Bell (2004), and Anderson (1988), challenge a pervasive myth that undermines the civil rights movement and the fight for equality in schools. The basic principle of the myth is that the Black community agreed with the general public that Black people would never be able to provide an adequate education for their children without access to White culture, White teachers, and White schools. The truth, according to Black researchers, is that African-Americans were relentless in their demand for integration because of the deep-rooted belief that Black children would never be able to compete with their White counterparts without access to human and financial resources that were readily available to White children. The inconsistency in the education of Blacks and Whites was not a new phenomenon illuminated by the *Brown v. The Board of Education* ruling; the journey for equality as it pertains to education developed as early as the seventeenth century when enslaved Blacks showed an interest in learning and were denied this opportunity.

Prior to emancipation, Black slaves were forbidden to learn to read. Slaves who were caught being literate by their masters faced harsh punishment, including death. Between 1800 and 1835, most southern states established laws that made teaching enslaved children to read or write punishable by law. Despite the consequences for their

actions, many slaves were determined to read and valued literacy. Instruction came from sympathetic Whites, freed slaves, literate slaves, and others learned with their master's children. After emancipation in 1863, the freed slaves' desire for an education did not subside as they joined other citizens in campaigning for universal, state-supported public education (Anderson, 1988). Booker T. Washington, born into slavery himself, commented, "few people who were not right in the midst of the scenes can form any exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for education. It was a whole race trying to go to school. Few were too young, and none too old, to make the attempt to learn" (as cited in Anderson, 1988, p. 5).

Public elementary schools or common schools became available to the majority of southern Black children during the first third of the twentieth century; however, local and state governments refused to provide transportation for them. Black southern parents, intrigued with the myriad of opportunities for education and employment in northern states and cities, began migrating from rural areas where children were an importance source of labor as late as 1914 (Anderson, 1988). An investigation conducted by the United States Department of Labor revealed that in order to keep their labor force in tact, additional financial support should be given to rural area schools to "keep Negroes in the South and make them satisfied with their lot" (Anderson, 1988, p. 152). Through the contributions of Black men and women, White lay people, and White northern philanthropists, the movement for universal schooling for Black children was realized. Two of the most important philanthropic agencies responsible for providing teachers and building schools for Black children were the Negro Rural School Fund, otherwise known as the Anna T. Jeanes Foundation and the Rosenwald Fund.

The Jeanes Fund worked with southern authorities to provide supervisors for Black teachers. The role of the supervisors was to instruct teachers on supervising elementary industrial work and raising money for new schoolhouses and school equipment. The Rosenwald building program illustrates the commitment that poor, citizens had to improving the education of their children. The Rosenwald Fund required that the community provide a percentage of the funds needed to build schools. Blacks contributed their life savings, land, lumber, and labor and built the majority of the 1,968 Rosenwald schools across the south from 1900-1935. When the schools needed repairs, the community exhausted all of their financial and human resources and participated in double taxation to make sure that the children and teachers had everything that they needed in order for their schools to remain open (Anderson, 1988). These Blacks, dependent on their faith in God believed that a free, public education for all Blacks was imminent although *Plessy v. Ferguson*'s doctrine of "separate but equal" had not yet been overturned in America's judicial system.

While the Rosenwald schools were being constructed, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) began publishing *The Crisis*, a magazine created and edited by W. E. B. Dubois, in the 1920s. This medium was used to disseminate the results of studies devoted to financing Negro schools in the southern states. In 1926, Georgia spent \$36.29 for White students and \$4.59 for Blacks. The disparities in funding did not end with pupil expenditures. White teachers earned a monthly salary of \$97.88 per month, while Black teachers were paid slightly more than one-half of this amount, earning \$49.41 (Bell, 2004). The discrepancy in teacher salaries was an issue that Thurgood Marshall championed when he set up his law practice in

Baltimore in 1934. He was dissatisfied with the inconsistency in the salaries in Black teachers and White employees. For example, the majority of Black teachers living in Maryland not only earned less money per year than White teachers, they also made \$339 less than White custodians. Although some Black teachers in Maryland were protected by tenure, many were afraid of unfair dismissal laws which could have ended in unemployment if they pushed for salary equalization. Despite the difference in salary, African-American teachers remained dutiful to educating their African-American pupils (Foster, 1997).

Before the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, little was known about the actual schooling practices of all-Black educational institutions. Since *Brown*, the American public, students of history, and even educational historians and policy analysts have generally assumed that all-Black segregated education was inferior (Randolph, 2004). Siddle-Walker (1996) believes that information provided about segregated schools is “incomplete”

Conversations about the legalized segregated schooling of African American children have traditionally focused on the dominant images of inferior facilities, secondhand books and materials, and poorly paid and undereducated teachers...Although this portrait of segregated schooling is accurate in its recounting of facilities and resource, it is incomplete in that it focuses only on one dimension of segregated schools...[E]vidence exists to indicate that African American teachers, principals, and parents were able to create learning environments that were valued by those who participated in these schools, in spite of the inequalities imposed upon them by white school boards. (p. 209)

Davis (2004) stated that “school desegregation ignored the possibility that there could be desirable elements of African American culture worthy of maintenance and celebration” (p. 404). Before integration became a court mandate, Black teachers were respected and schools and communities were united in supporting one another for the benefit of

children. Cole (1993) reported “in those ‘colored schools’ more often than not there were African American teachers who believed in our children and their capacity to learn” (p. 165). Many Black children thrived in these settings because they were immersed in their culture, surrounded those who truly cared for them both inside and outside of school, and could freely express themselves (Davis, 2004).

Michele Foster (1997) was interested in the plight of African-American students, and she interviewed African-American teachers who taught during segregation (*The Elders*), integration (*The Veterans*), and teachers who had less than three years of experience (*The Novices*). Foster wanted to determine the factors that encouraged and discouraged teachers in their quest to teach Black students. The participants listed various obstacles such as *de facto* segregation and lack of resources as barriers to their students receiving equity and equality in education. Both *The Elders* and *The Veterans* strongly believed that integration (as a result of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision) widened the chasm that separated Black students from their White peers. hooks (1994) recounts her own frustration with integration:

When we entered racist, desegregated, white schools we left a world where teachers believed that to educate Black children rightly would require a political commitment. Now we were mainly taught by white teachers whose lessons reinforced racist stereotypes. For Black children, education was no longer about the practice of freedom. Realizing this, I lost my love of school. (p. 3)

The Elders and *The Veterans* also questioned the effectiveness of desegregation which resulted in many Black teachers becoming unemployed and the demise of the Black community. Being of the same ethnic background is not a prerequisite for teaching African-American students; however, teachers of African-American students must show

“tough love” which is a combination of a belief that failure is not an option (high expectations) coupled with compassion (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005).

Urban Education

Traditionally, *urban* has been used to define a geographic location that consists primarily of inner-city living; however, this term has changed over time to include social structures, political systems, and economic systems (Cooper & Sundeen, 1979). Urban, as physical place, comprises physical boundaries and geographical features. When urban is used within the context of social structure, focus is placed on those aspects of existence which affect people such as “stratification, the characteristics of subcultures, and the types of social interactions that occur” (p. 486). Urban has been also used to identify sources of power, employment patterns, and economic trends. Cooper and Sundeen (1979) explain why using *urban* primarily in terms of location is no longer appropriate

[U]rban problems are the problems of cities; urban life is life in a city; urban politics is synonymous with the politics of cities. However, almost without our realizing it, a transformation has taken place which makes this simple equation of ‘urban’ and ‘city places’ inadequate. The technologies of transportation and communication have rapidly extended the experience of urban places to the point where the very concept of bounded locations has been robbed of its power to define “urban.” (p. 487)

Gentrification and the revitalization of inner cities have forced people having low socioeconomic status to relocate to suburban and rural areas, and the experiences and influences of city life on these people follow them wherever they may reside. As a result, schools located in suburban and rural areas may possess urban characteristics such as high percentages of students receiving free or reduced lunch, increased numbers of students participating in compensatory programs, low parental involvement and resources, and high numbers of immigrants (Brown, 2004). Teachers in urban schools

must be prepared to positively respond to the aforementioned (and other) issues that may filter inside of the classroom and compromise the instructional program. Despite the obstacles that teachers of urban students may face, Gordon (1999) states that “it is the *intensity* of working for and caring about students in urban schools that makes effective urban teachers different from their counterparts in the suburbs” (p. 304).

In order to help students attending schools in urban areas and/or schools with urban attributes meet or exceed the academic goals established by local and state boards of education, urban teachers must implement both an affective and instructional curriculum. Not only do successful urban teachers cover the material in the required courses of reading, [w]riting, and [a]rithmetic (otherwise referred to as “the three Rs”), they must infuse culturally responsive pedagogy into the classroom, exhibit a caring attitude, understand the nature of “tough love,” and communicate effectively with students and their parents as well (Brown, 2004). Gordon (1999) discovered that effective urban teachers are also clear about their educational beliefs, have high expectations, like their students as people, have a desire for their students to learn, and are dedicated to helping them succeed.

The classroom is the forum in which teachers have the potential to transform students’ lives. According to Haberman (1995), a teacher’s classroom management skills have an important role in teaching and learning

Whatever the reasons for children’s behavior – whether poverty, personality, a handicapping condition, a dysfunctional home, or an abusive environment – classroom teachers are responsible for managing children, seeing that they work together in a confined space for long periods, and ensuring that they learn. (p. 22)

Urban teachers must create an environment that recognizes and appreciates students' cultural diversity and welcomes those differences. Brown (2004) states that the problem with creating these learning spaces occurs when the majority of teachers in urban schools continue to be "inexperienced middle-class White, European Americans" (p. 267) whose life experiences are vastly different from those of their students. Regardless of the ethnicity of the urban teacher, Brown (2004) is a proponent of culturally responsive management that includes research-based pedagogical practices, open communication, and the cooperation of the students in the classroom. The quality of the relationships between students and teachers is paramount in the culturally responsive classroom. Teachers are not afraid to demonstrate their genuine care for their students, and positive feelings are reciprocated by the students. Ladson-Billings (1994) states that successful teachers of African-American students have created environments in which "psychological safety is a hallmark of each of these classrooms. The students feel comfortable and supported" (p. 73). Gordon (1999) adds, "The best urban teachers show warmth and affection to their students and give priority to the development of their relationships with students as an avenue to student growth" (p. 305). As positive relationships are forged and a learning community is formed, urban teachers must establish their authority in the classroom. Delpit (1995) suggests that urban classrooms should be places in which explicit expectations are stated, failure is not an option, and inappropriate behaviors are dealt with immediately because "Black children expect an authority figure to act with authority" (p. 35). Since the 1960s, urban education has been the target of researchers as they have sought to improve the dismal academic conditions of urban schools. As a result, urban schooling has been the focus of many studies,

policies, and programs and current reform efforts including the “No Child Left Behind Act” (Foster, Lewis, & Onafowora, 2005).

The Context of Current Educational Reform Efforts

January 2002 reshaped education nationally when President George W. Bush signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This reform, also known as the “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001,” has provided the most changes to ESEA since it was enacted in 1965. ESEA, a 1,080-page statute, has mandated that educators and students be held accountable for student achievement as measured by benchmarks such as standardized and criterion-referenced assessments. In addition to the mandates that outline the need for improving student achievement, the law also expands the federal role in education by the close monitoring of student results, giving the districts more local control and flexibility, and expanding the options for parents (Living Up To High Standards, 2002).

Recent educational reform has placed teachers in a compromising position. The educational community asks teachers to “think outside [of] the box” while insisting that curriculum objectives be taught in a prescribed order. The autonomy of teachers is also infringed upon through the careful scrutiny of lesson plans and systematic observations to ensure that teachers are “maximizing classroom instruction.” Regardless of the educational agenda of the leader of our country, the goal of American education has always been to prepare students to be contributing members to society (Holloway, 2002; Noddings, 2005). All teachers have been asked to complete an arduous task during six hours of student contact – individualize instruction for all students while paying careful attention to their unique learning modalities and needs. This task must be completed as

the teacher simultaneously meets various deadlines given by building and district-level administrators; maintains open lines of communication with parents; redirects negative student behavior; and attempts to increase student performance on norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessments. In the African-American community, African-American teachers assume an additional responsibility as they “reinforce the community’s cultural norms and encourage Black students to achieve beyond what society has expected of them” (Foster, 1991, p. 233). In other words, African-American teachers are expected to form an “extended kinship” (p. 261) that gives them the authority to instruct and discipline African-American students in the same manner as a parent or relative.

Using education as a tool to prepare our students to be global competitors has been replaced by the “kill and drill” method of preparing our children for standardized and criterion-referenced tests (Long, 2004). In order for desired student outcomes (i.e., higher achievement scores, graduation rates, etc.) to occur, more responsibilities have been placed on teachers as federal, state, district, and local school mandates have issued consequences for schools whose students consistently underperform on criterion-referenced batteries. The implications that school reform has on the nature of teaching has some educators frustrated, outraged, and disgruntled about their profession (McElroy, 2005). However, local districts are soliciting the assistance of their professional development and curriculum departments to find creative means to provide teachers with alternative teaching methods that address various learning styles, yet prepare students for assessments that must be reported to federal and state departments of education.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Multicultural Education

Ladson-Billings (1994; 1995; 2000), hooks (1994), Gay (2002; 2003; 2005), and Fu (1997) have beseeched educators to remain cognizant of the influence of culture on marginalized students. Students participate in schooling with their unique identities (Gee, 2004) which include embedded social and cultural norms that are responsible for defining who they are. Multicultural educators claim that the infusion of culturally-relevant activities into the curriculum demonstrates a respect and appreciation for diversity and will improve the academic achievement and self-efficacy of marginalized students (Gay, 2003).

Ladson-Billings (1994) studied the teaching practices of five African-American and three European American teachers who were recommended to her by parents and administrators as being effective teachers of African-American students. Based on her findings from this research, Ladson-Billings coined the term *culturally relevant pedagogy*. The basic premise of this teaching philosophy is “committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). Facets of cultural relevance are teachers’ high teaching efficacy; belief that connections must be made between learning in school and the students’ communities; and a personal awareness of global issues in order for them to prepare them for the future. Teachers who embrace culturally relevant methods also recognize that lack of parental participation is not indicative of their desire for children to succeed academically. Many parents of marginalized students must work at times that are not convenient for them to attend parent conferences and other parent meetings. They care about their children’s education, but the need to provide food, clothing, and shelter for their family supersedes their ability

to be actively involved in their child's school. Culturally relevant classrooms are considered to be learning communities which promote collaboration and engagement in meaningful dialogue between students and their teacher. In this environment, student differences are not considered deficit because everyone is regarded as knowledgeable in some regard, and "funds of knowledge" (Moll & Gonzalez, 2001, p. 158) are valued as positive contributions that students can make to the instructional program.

Students who have established relationships comprised of trust and mutual understanding with their teachers are more apt to willingly participate in literacy activities (Williams, 2004). Their engagement in the task limits the number of disruptions that may lead to discipline referrals, and such students may perceive reading as "stupid" because the reading activities are not relevant to them. Although they do not understand what is required to be a successful reader, students who do not possess specific literacy skills know that they are unable to participate because of their own limitations. Teachers who recognize that students exhibit undesired behavior(s) to mask their inability to complete required academic task(s) are able to redirect any negative displays with explicit teaching. Ladson-Billings (1994) and her cadre of teachers suggest that teachers of African-American students can assure the academic success of American students by: (1) making the curriculum meaningful by infusing additional texts (selected by the teacher and students) and personal stories into teaching and learning; (2) helping students recognize that African-Americans have endured many tragedies and triumphs in history; and (3) guiding students to understand the complexities of the world in which they live and prepare them to become change agents themselves.

African-American students are not the only ethnic minority group that has documented prejudice in American schools. Fu (1995) documents her frustration with trying to convert her methods of writing that were acceptable in China to more acceptable levels for western teachers. In *My Trouble is English*, Fu blamed herself for her academic trouble, but later discovered that her English proficiency was not the problem – her traditional culture was at odds with American cultural ideals espoused by her teachers. Fu also questioned how educators expected students to succeed in a democracy when marginalization keeps some students on the brinks of education by assigning worksheets and other meaningless exercises.

Jimenez (1997, 2001) shares his family's journey and experiences as immigrants from Mexico in autobiographical texts that are appropriate for young adults. In their roles as migrant farm workers, the Jimenez family had to utilize every member of the family (who was old enough to work) to contribute to the family's survival in a new country. Jimenez and his brother missed months of school due to berry-picking seasons and were met with the disdain of their teachers and fellow students who made certain assumptions about the intelligence of "Mexicans." This story recounts the patience of educators who taught Jimenez English and ensured that he attended college and the ignorance of other educators who were surprised that Jimenez demonstrated academic prowess.

Current multicultural literature references the work of Geneva Gay (2002, 2005) who is considered an expert on multicultural education. Regardless of the time that her works are written, she consistently charges teachers to become knowledgeable of the richness of cultural diversity; analyze their personal beliefs about their own ethnicity and the impact that these beliefs have on pedagogy and their interactions with their students;

be willing to teach students as well as learn from them; and possess skills to teach culturally diverse students in positive ways (Gay, 2002, 2005). Gay is also a proponent of holistic teaching because she believes that children cannot separate their literate, physical, and social selves in order to reduce teaching to a mindless profession. Gay (2002) contends that teaching culturally diverse students is difficult, but worth all of the effort and energy that teachers exert.

In many instances, students who are ethnic minorities must also contend with low socioeconomic status. Poverty is a social factor that marginalizes all students similarly regardless of their ethnicity. Kozol (1991) and Purcell-Gates (1995) both focus on the predicament of poor students whose socioeconomic status is permitted to impede their right to an equal and equitable education. Kozol exposed the disparities of human and financial resources in American schools located in cities such as East St. Louis (IL), Chicago, New York, Camden (NJ), San Antonio (TX), and Washington, D.C. Many of the teachers highlighted in these schools with high poverty rates attempted to provide instruction in spite of the conditions (i.e., inoperable equipment, dilapidated buildings, limited technological resources, etc.) in which they had to teach. Other teachers were too overwhelmed to look beyond the dreadful circumstances of the schools and focus on the students. Placing the fate of children and their education at the mercy of millage rates compromises democracy when urban communities are predominately comprised of closed businesses, apartments, and low property taxes (Kozol, 1991). Students, administrators, teachers, and the community will suffer when schools continue to recycle uneducated citizens.

Purcell-Gates (1995) studied the home-school literacy interactions of an Appalachian family whose culture, language barrier, and low socioeconomic status each contributed to a “cycle of low literacy.” Jenny, the mother in this investigation, wanted to assist her son with his school activities, but neither she nor her husband possessed adequate literacy skills that were necessary to bridge the home-school connection. The teachers and the administrators of the school felt that Jenny did not care about her child; however, notes that were sent home were unable to be read by the mother. The mother’s pleas for assistance from the school were ignored, and Purcell-Gates found herself becoming an advocate for Jenny and her family. This work illustrates the impact of family literacy on student achievement when literacy levels in the home are low or non-existent. Each of the landmark works addressed above focus on one or more groups that face discrimination; however, terms such as *urban* and *marginalized* must be clearly defined in order for the magnitude of these terms on teaching and learning to be understood.

Although the research of Hunter-Quartz and the TEP Research Group (2003), Nieto (2003), and Weiner (2002) state that marginalized students attending school in urban settings are most likely to receive instruction from teachers with the least teaching experience, veteran teachers are scrambling to find strategies when “other” children appear in their classrooms as well (Gay, 2002). The politically correct term *urban* has expanded its definition in recent years. Once used primarily as a reference to the inner city, schools with urban characteristics are those comprised of one or more of the following: (1) high numbers of students living in poverty; (2) high numbers of immigrant or students with limited English proficiency; (3) low academic performance on criterion

and norm reference assessments; (4) lack of financial resources; and (5) high numbers of ethnic minorities (Davis & Dobbs, 2005). Defining urban in a broader sense labels schools as such even if the school is located in a suburban or rural area.

The plight of marginalized groups has been investigated by experts in various disciplines—education, sociology, and philosophy. Psychologists Sue and Sue (2003) offered the following explanation of the traits society uses to distinguish marginalized groups from the mainstream culture:

Other societies or groups may be perceived as less developed, uncivilized, primitive, or even pathological. The group's lifestyles or ways of doing things are considered inferior. Physical characteristics such as dark complexion, black hair, and brown eyes; cultural characteristics such as belief in non-Christian religions (Islam, Confucianism, polytheism, etc.), collectivism, present time orientation, and the importance of shared wealth; and linguistic characteristics such as bilingualism, non-standard English, speaking with an accent, use of nonverbal and contextual communications, and reliance on the oral tradition are usually seen as less desirable by the society. (p. 70)

According to these characteristics, students who are not White, middle class, monolingual Christians are considered marginalized in American society. Schools mirror societal stratification and uphold the ideals of the larger society; therefore, marginalized groups will continue to be the targets of exclusionary practices perpetuated by illiteracy and unjust teaching practices unless educators answer their charge to be vehicles for social justice (Apple, 2003; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Gay, 2005).

Increasing the academic performance of marginalized students has been the focus of schools throughout the nation because of the mandates and punitive measures outlined in *No Child Left Behind* for schools that do not meet the standards. Since 2002, administrators and teachers in urban schools (and those schools with urban characteristics) have attempted to find methods that will result in higher literacy

achievement as measured by federal and state assessments. Unfortunately, many of these techniques have limited teachers' creativity in providing authentic literacy experiences for students in favor of "teaching to the test." This places our teachers of marginalized students in a precarious position – do they teach the curriculum for student mastery of the standards for short-term test-taking, or do they employ pedagogical techniques that will help create meaningful learning and achievement in the long run? Researchers of teaching and learning agree that if teachers transform their classrooms into learning communities through the integration of culturally relevant pedagogy (hooks, 1994; Kuykendall, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994) and an ethic of care (Foster, 1997; Heath, 1983; Noddings, 1984; Purcell-Gates, 1995), marginalized students can and will be able to participate in a democratic society. Teachers must choose to employ techniques that will unlock the shackles that confine and imprison their minds, bodies, and spirits.

Literacy is a much broader concept than just one's ability to read, speak, listen, and write as a form of wider communication. Literacy entails the admission that students possess "funds of knowledge" (Moll & Gonzalez, 2001) and unique identities (Gee, 2004). Funds of knowledge are the skills that students possess to navigate around their world. Identity consists of those cultural norms that are internalized and helps shape the student's personality and value system (Gee, 2004). Capitalizing on the skills that students possess and respecting them as individuals are conducive to encouraging marginalized students to acquire literacy skills. Once teachers build positive relationships with their students, meaningful and worthwhile teaching and learning can occur.

Students who find their culture and learning styles embedded in the curriculum are more likely to be motivated to learn (Gay, 2003). Motivation fosters learning as

students increase their self-efficacy by actively participating in literacy activities (Delpit, 1995; Foster, 1997; Fu, 1997; Hilliard, 2002; Kuykendall, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994). As the definition of Sue and Sue (2003) indicates, language and socioeconomic status can be barriers to literacy attainment and place those students who are not of the mainstream culture at the lower rungs of the societal hierarchy (Heath, 1983; Kozol, 1991; Purcell-Gates, 1995). Linguistic differences must also be recognized and celebrated for students who have difficulty reading, writing, and speaking Standard English, or the “Language of Wider Communication” (Smitherman, 2003). Students can be taught to code switch (translating their dialect into Standard English) without denigrating their home language. As students command Standard English, they will be able to transfer that knowledge to other subject areas.

Standards and a prescribed curriculum exist in every school district, but teachers who enrich the standards and curriculum with authentic literature and experiences from various cultural groups assist students in increasing their own cultural awareness and tolerance of the uniqueness of others. Teachers must make the concerted effort to capitalize on the abilities of their students and engage in lesson planning that will allow them to flourish in the literacy classroom. Planning instruction for diverse students can be challenging, but professional learning can be used as a vehicle to address problems that teachers have in tailoring instruction to students’ needs.

Professional Learning

Professional learning, more commonly known as professional or staff development, is a very important component of teacher education. One requirement of teacher certificate renewal in the state of Georgia is that teachers complete 100 hours of

staff development within a five-year period. Many districts have also included a site-based staff development requirement to address issues that are particular to individual schools. McWhorter and Bullion-Mears (1997) make a distinction between professional development and in-service training which are often used interchangeably. Professional development is defined “as a self-actualized, motivated, and proactive approach to teacher training” (pp. 3-4). Conversely, in-service training normally consists of the presentation of prescribed topics using a delivery model requiring limited involvement by the participants. Fleischer and Fox (2003) agree that “not all professional development is created equal” (p. 259). These authors argue that “we can identify pretty easily the kind of professional development that doesn’t seem to work: one shot, fix ‘em up experiences, often with talking heads in front of the room who have no deep contextual understanding of the teachers and the place they call school” (p. 259). What we need, Fox and Fleischer (2004) suggest, is meaningful, worthwhile, context-specific professional development that regards teachers as intellectual problem-solvers and is organized around the needs of teachers, students, and the local school community. Likewise, Cochran-Smith (2003) suggests that we should “conceptualize teacher development across the lifespan as a learning problem rather than a training problem” and should help teachers learn how “to pose and solve the new problems that continuously emerge in classrooms and schools” (p. 373):

[W]hen teaching is rightly regarded as an intellectual activity and when it is acknowledged that teachers are motivated, at least in part, by a love of learning, then it becomes clear that what is needed are more opportunities for teachers to work with others in learning communities; raise new questions about students, subject matter, assessments, equity, and access; and generate local knowledge through collaborative analysis and interpretation. (p. 373)

In 2000, the results of a three-year study on professional development were published by the U.S. Department of Education. This investigation concluded that “effective” staff development was positively correlated to the quality of instruction delivered in the classroom; however, many teachers, when surveyed, have indicated that they do not receive “effective” staff development (Garry & Graham, 2004). This concern is legitimate and should receive some discussion among those persons responsible for planning staff development. Boggs (1996) stated that teachers felt that traditional staff development does not consider them as experts in their field. Instead outside consultants are hired to provide them with information that they already possess. The importance of professional learning was also investigated by Egawa (1995). Her work with five teachers in the Midwest gave them the opportunity to use inquiry as a method of discussing the curriculum during their school’s restructuring process. Participants welcomed the opportunity to discuss curricular issues with one another and with the researcher that matched up “beliefs ... and practice” (p. 158). Findings from the literature on professional development show us that such experiences should be structured to be congruent with the needs of students instead of being selected by persons who are unfamiliar with the desires of the school (Lesch, 2000).

The goal of the National Staff Development Council (n.d.) (NSDC) is that “all teachers in all schools will experience high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work by 2007” (n.p.). The organization delineates the standards for professional learning into *context standards* that address learning communities, leadership, and resources; *process standards* that focuses on methods of instructional design and implementation and assessment; and *content standards* that addresses issues relating to

equity, quality teaching, and parental involvement. All professional learning goals established by a school district or individual schools must be aligned with the mission of NSDC. The purpose of school is to produce citizens who will be viewed globally as legitimate competition. In order for this to occur for marginalized students, teachers may need to participate in professional learning activities such as planning professional development, attending national and international reading conferences, forming partnerships with educators at other schools, and participating in teacher study groups.

Teachers must be involved in the planning of professional learning that occurs in the school. Districts rely on consultants outside of the school system to give a neutral perspective of education, but marginalized students do not need neutrality (Lesch, 2000). Conversely, these students need adults who have formed an alliance to assist them in achieving their academic goals. Professional learning for schools should include all staff members including paraprofessionals and special area teachers (art, music, physical education, speech, etc.) in order for all stakeholders to be on one accord on the methods that will be used to assist the students. Because all teachers are considered learners (Dalton, 1998), administrators must provide teachers with the financial resources that will enable them to attend local, national, and international conferences to expand their teaching repertoire (NSDC, n.d.). Observing colleagues who have been identified as “master” literacy teachers at other schools is another form of relevant staff development. Not only can teachers obtain strategies from their peers, they can form relationships and a support system with teachers outside of their building as well (NSDC, n.d.).

Marginalized students are those standing on periphery of education, and teachers, school and district administrators, and support staff stand in the middle. The unique

circumstances of the students has the power to command their attention away from those who are attempting to bring about social justice, but it is the responsibility of all educators to go to the edge where our students can be guided from the outside to the inside. Educators should exhibit the behaviors of the geese in order to help marginalized students. When making long flights, one goose flies ahead in the v-formation. When the goose who is leading tires, it drops back and allows another to take the lead. Teachers who care about their students internalize the problems that they face and this can consume one's energy (Graves, 2001). As the lead teacher or learner tires, members of the educational community should proceed to the front and act as a guide until all students arrive at their chosen destinations.

The research overwhelmingly points to the experiences of teachers in influencing their behavior(s) in the classroom (McCray, Sindelar, Kilgore, & Neal, 2002). In order to provide marginalized students in urban settings (or areas with urban characteristics) with a chance to participate in a democratic society, teachers and administrators should take charge of their profession and determine methods that are best suited for the students under their tutelage. Professional development begins as pre-service teachers learn about the trends and issues in their teacher preparation courses and continues until the experienced teacher retires (Nieto, 2003). Teachers who are assigned to teach marginalized students in urban settings must possess a will to make a difference in the lives of students whose only hope for a better life is dependent on education. As change agents who are dissatisfied with the status quo, teachers and school administrators can best help themselves and their students by participating in quality professional development, forming relationships with students and their families, and collaborating

with other educators (Nieto, 2003; Short, 1993). Study groups, a promising approach to quality professional development for teachers, have shown potential by involving teachers as intellectuals and collaborative inquirers as they explore and examine existing literature to ameliorate problems indicative to their particular school.

Teacher Study Groups (TSGs)

One effective method of professional development being implemented in many districts is the use of teacher study groups. Teacher study groups (TSGs) are being formed at schools throughout the nation as a vehicle to help teachers forge strong relationships with their colleagues through engaging in discourse that will strengthen instructional practice and address other topics of interest to the group (Lefever-Davis, Wilson, Moore, Kent, & Hopkins, 2003). In a study group, a small group of teachers work collaboratively for a period of weeks, months, or years in order to develop a strategic plan for addressing an issue of concern (Garry & Graham, 2004). Many studies have focused on the need for students to become critical thinkers who are permitted to share their thoughts and ideas verbally with their peers. Teachers must also be provided with those same opportunities to engage in discourse with administrators and colleagues about issues of importance to them. Teacher study groups have focused on exclusively on reading (Hollins, McIntyre, DeBose, Hollins, & Towner, 2004); reading and topics of interest to the participants (Birchak, Connor, Crawford, Kahn, Kaser, Turner, & Short, 1998); mathematics (Arbaugh, 2003); and technology (Garry & Graham, 2004). Educational issues that influence the manner in which teachers are able to provide instruction to students must be addressed, and the formulation of teacher study groups at individual schools is a promising method to recognize teachers as contributing members

of the teaching profession. A variety of teacher study groups has been implemented in school districts to improve some aspect of individual schools.

In 1999, 60-70% of African-American and Mexican American students were “poor readers” (Hollins et al., 2004, p. 247). The goal of the Hollins et al. (2004) was to improve low literacy levels of urban, high poverty African-American students. The three-year, longitudinal study focused on collaborative learning as a means for 12 teachers (ten African-American, two European American – nine women and three men) to improve their quality of teaching and student learning. The researchers wanted to use the social nature of teacher study groups in order for the participants to link their instructional approaches to the culture that their students bring to school. In order to determine the types of support that teachers need in order to facilitate the literacy development of low-achieving, minority students, the researchers employed a mixed method in order to collect and analyze their data. Qualitative data collection techniques such as interviews, the audio recording of group meetings, researcher fieldnotes, and “informal conversations” (p. 254) highlighted the feelings and perceptions of the teachers. Hollins et al. were then able to organize the data and determine themes based on the dialogue that occurred during the study. To determine the impact of the intervention (which included the teachers’ use of conversation to improve students’ critical thinking skills), the Stanford Achievement Test, 9th edition was used as a pre- and posttest. As a result of this investigation, teachers reported that parental involvement and student achievement increased, they became more accepting of students’ cultural capital, and the efficacy of students and teachers increased.

The teacher study group facilitated by Birchak et al. (1998) was a seven-year longitudinal study. Initially the group was comprised of teachers from two different elementary schools; however, members from one of the schools decided to form their own group in their community in order to have more intimate discussions. After the group divided, Kathy Short facilitated one group and the other group chose teachers to rotate into the facilitative role. During the teacher study group's first year, the participants discussed how to integrate literature into the district's newly adopted literature-based curriculum. The second year, the group focused on assessment and the use of portfolios in the classroom. In the middle of this year, the group split and the other group examined classroom management. Other topics investigated (each lasted one year) included the following: multiculturalism, building community, reading strategies, inquiry curriculum, library as school center, and inquiry curriculum. The goal of the researchers was to build learning communities and make help teachers make connections between theory and practice; however, the researchers ensured that data collection and analysis involved the participants as well. Interviews, observations by the researchers, audio-taping of meetings, researcher fieldnotes, and participant journals were used as sources to to identify codes and themes from the data. As a result of their participation in the study group teachers felt better equipped to confidently discuss the curriculum with parents and other staff members. The study group was also viewed as a tool of transformation by helping one participant "reinforce my idea to always challenge the status quo" (p. 133). The comments that were included in the results showed that the participants viewed their involvement with the study group favorably.

The influence on technology on educational practice was addressed by the study of Garry and Graham (2004). In 2000, the U.S. Department of Education released the results of a three-year study on professional development. This study revealed that effective professional development had a positive impact on the number and variety of strategies that teachers used in the classroom. Garry and Graham (2004) gathered data in the states of North Carolina and Florida. Both studies sought to examine the same aspects: the use of a technology program (WebQuest) endorsed by the district and technology integration in the classroom. The Wake County, North Carolina site consisted of five teachers who assembled bi-monthly for ten weeks. This school hired an outside consultant to facilitate the activities of this group. Teachers participating in Miami-Dade County, Florida site were provided with “highly proficient” teachers who served as on-site facilitators. In the Florida site, the study group was composed of 5-10 teachers (one elementary school teacher, two high school teachers, and three “others” who heard about the study). Garry and Graham documented the use of reflection journals used by the teachers in order to document their use of the technology, interviews, and fieldnotes taken during the study group meetings. The teachers expressed that they would use WebQuest in their classroom with their students. They also stated that their participation in the study group allowed them to “steal” integration ideas from their colleagues and they would include technology into their daily instruction.

Arbaugh (2003) noticed that that improving literacy instruction received more attention than mathematics, and she sought to strengthen high school teachers’ confidence in implementing a new geometry curriculum in Columbus, Indiana. The Toyota’s TIME grant and the National Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) funded

Arbaugh's research. Nine teachers were able to secure substitutes when the teacher study group met during school hours, and they received stipends when they gathered after contract hours. This study group met once every two weeks from October 1999 until March 2000 (a total of 10 times). Arbaugh served as a group participant, facilitator, and researcher in this study. As a participant-observer, Arbaugh audio-taped each session, conducted interviews, and allowed the teachers to observe each other in the classroom in order to provide feedback on teaching methods. Themes were determined using member checking and the interviews and audio-taped transcriptions were coded according to themes. Members of the teacher study group reported that discussing how to use resources and receiving feedback from the facilitator and colleagues was helpful to their professional growth as teachers. Additionally, the participants named the ability to share materials and talk about classroom practices as most the most useful aspects of the study. Teacher study groups can be implemented in a variety of subject areas for a variety of reasons; however, careful planning by the facilitator and the interest of the participants is key to the group's success.

According to Tichenor and Heins, (2000), teacher study groups accomplish three tasks: "(1) they help educators implement curricular and instructional innovations; (2) they aid in collaboratively planning for school improvement; and (3) they guide educators in studying current research regarding teaching and learning" (p. 316). In an effort to improve student achievement, educators must remain cognizant of those who are primarily responsible for ensuring that America's children are learning – teachers.

Findings from these studies demonstrate that each member of the group assumes dual roles as the facilitator and participant. As a result, colleagues are able to increase

their teaching strategies, collaborate with peers, and interact on a more personal level with one of the school's administrators. Traditional staff development often reduces the participants' role to that of a passive observer when education itself is not a static entity. The educational community asks teachers to allow their students to become active members of the classroom community, but this same theory often does not apply in traditional in-services when the teachers themselves are students. As these studies show, the organization and implementation of teacher study groups have the potential to improve teacher efficacy, provide positive perceptions of staff development, and foster cohesion between administrators and teachers.

Teacher Efficacy and Motivation

Teacher efficacy is based on the framework of Albert Bandura's social cognitive learning theory. Bandura (1985) described efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). Henson, Hogan, and Vacha-Chase (2001) expanded this initial definition to specifically address teacher efficacy. These researchers defined teacher efficacy as a teacher's "judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult and unmotivated" (p. 419). The efficacy beliefs of teachers are related to instructional practices and to student achievement; therefore it is imperative that teachers provide students with successful experiences that will be beneficial throughout their lives (Henson, Kogan, & Vacha-Haase, 2001). As teachers converse during teacher study group meetings, their confidence in their own abilities may increase due to affirmation and the support of their co-workers. The solitude often associated with being restricted to

the confines of individual classrooms is replaced by a feeling of camaraderie as teachers realize that some of their experiences are common to all educators.

The role of self-efficacy in teaching and learning continues to interest researchers and practitioners alike. Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli (1996) assert that self-efficacy has proven to be a powerful force in learning and motivation. Teacher efficacy, a teacher's confidence in his or her ability to promote students' learning, was identified almost 25 years ago as one of the few teacher characteristics related to student achievement in a study by the Rand Corporation (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). Since that early study, teacher efficacy has been associated with such significant variables as student motivation and achievement.

In addition, teachers' efficacy beliefs also relate to their behavior in the classroom. Efficacy affects the effort they invest in teaching, the goals they set, and their level of aspiration. Teachers with a strong sense of efficacy tend to exhibit greater levels of planning and organization when compared to their colleagues whose possess low levels of efficacy. They are also more open to new ideas and are more willing to experiment with new methods to better meet the needs of their students (Malone, 2002).

Bandura (1985) proposed that teacher efficacy beliefs influence the level of effort and persistence that individual teachers put forth in their daily work, and their shared beliefs are vital to the school climate. High teacher efficacy results in a persistence that leads to better academic performance. Low teacher efficacy leads to less effort and lower levels of performance. Bandura also named four influences that contribute to teacher efficacy: mastery experience, physiological arousal, vicarious experience, and verbal persuasion. Mastery experiences are the successes and failures of teachers that will affect

their efficacy. Physiological arousal addresses the affective states associated with teacher efficacy. Teachers deal with a variety of stressors on a daily basis and their adaptations to these situations are very important to teacher efficacy and student outcomes. Vicarious experiences occur as teachers collaborate with one another to share positive experiences that can be utilized with their own students through vehicles such as teacher study groups. Teachers participate in the act of verbal persuasion continuously through dialogue and feedback about achievement through this type of professional development opportunity. Johnston and Wilder (1992) found that members of teacher study groups showed high efficacy as they became more confident in their teaching abilities due to their participation in this initiative. Teachers expressed a new willingness to actively participate in the group's discussions and were willing to take a "professional stand" (p. 629) when others disagreed with their opinions; therefore, the benefits of teacher study groups support Bandura's theory of social cognitive development as it relates to increasing efficacy in teachers.

The goal of American education is to produce future decision-makers who are competent enough to sustain current value systems through the relationships with other people nationally and internationally (Noddings, 2005). In order to compete globally, students must be placed in educational environments in which they will be stimulated intellectually, socially, and emotionally. The findings of Copenhaver and McIntyre (1992) indicate that students have a better likelihood of being successful if teachers have high self-efficacy beliefs. Teacher study groups can assist schools with creating positive teaching experiences that may contribute to teachers' sense of self-efficacy and thus may have direct or indirect implications for school environments and student outcomes.

Impact of School Leaders on Teacher Growth and Change

Murphy (1999) states that teacher attitudes have an indirect implication on their interactions with students due to the support received from the administration. He also asserts that when teachers are engaged in purposeful and useful staff development, these educators are more prepared to instruct students. When principals and teachers collaborate to find effective alternatives to traditional staff development, teachers become empowered and more educated decision-makers. Administrators who respect and recognize the contributions that teachers can make when defining goals for students and educational design will create small communities of leaders within the school (Bloom & Stein, 2004).

Barth (1990) believed that in order for administrators to lead a learning organization they must create an environment where “adults and children learn simultaneously and in the same place to think critically and analytically and to solve problems that are important to them. In a community of learners, learning is endemic and mutually visible” (p. 43). Learning, according to Barth, is a mutual event that occurs among all stakeholders and includes “(1) a higher level of collegiality; (2) a place teeming with frequent, helpful personal and professional interactions; (3) a fostered climate of risk taking; (4) adults who genuinely want to be there; and (5) a profound respect for and encouragement of diversity” (p. 9). The importance of collaboration among school administrators, teacher-leaders, and staff members cannot be underestimated as schools attempt to meet local, district, and national requirements for student performance. Our schools are ever-changing in terms of cultural and intellectual diversity of students (and teachers), and staffs who have established open lines of

communication are not only united in their endeavor to acquire or maintain school success, but they are more likely to be working towards a common goal as well.

Administrators must be instructional leaders; therefore, teacher study groups have the potential to encourage setting high expectations that have a “trickle down” effect. Once administrators set high expectations for teachers, teachers may set and hold high expectations for the students. Administrators, regardless of their assignment (attendance, discipline, or instruction) are responsible for conducting formal and informal observations of classroom teaching. In order to competently observe classes, administrators themselves must be aware of effective teaching methodologies and form professional relationships built upon trust and honesty.

School leaders should also facilitate staff development activities that will improve and enhance the quality of teaching and learning. Because education is not stagnant, the inclusion of teacher study groups into the professional learning curriculum allows teachers to share their expertise in the classroom with administrators who are responsible for critiquing their instructional delivery. Administrative participation in teacher study groups can be mutually beneficial not only for teachers, but administrators as well (Short, 1993). The administrator(s) will be able to communicate effectively and intelligently about the instructional program to all stakeholders due to the credibility associated with being an informed supervisor. Visible leaders who have a commitment to student learning focus on growth and improvement (especially in teaching and learning) and who possess high self-efficacy will go to any lengths for all stakeholders. Amidst all of the positive implications surrounding the participation of administrators in a teacher study group, negative aspects exist as well. The inclusion of administrators in an arena that

encourages honest discussion may discourage some teachers from participating; therefore, the dynamics of the group may be altered due to the administrator's presence. In a school where the administrator is neither respected nor trusted, his or her participation may result in responses from teachers that are not representative of his or her true feelings (Carver, 2004).

Teacher study groups have the potential to transform the way that teachers feel about themselves, their students, and their abilities (Saavedra, 1996). With administrative support, teacher study groups can replace the boredom that is associated with traditional staff development and empower them to use inquiry to solve issues that they have identified. When teachers are provided with opportunities to actively participate the decision-making process, they become active members of education, and this efficacious behavior will positively affect school climate and student achievement.

Inclusive Leadership

Inclusive leadership was birthed as alternative to educative practices that excluded stakeholders from participating in some fashion in the decision-making processes of schools. In contrast to leadership styles that assume that the principal is the only person who is competent or capable of leading members of the school community, inclusive leadership is not viewed "in terms of positions or individuals who perform certain tasks but as a collective process in which everyone is included or fairly represented" (Ryan, 2006, p. 16). Ryan (2006) claims that inclusive leadership takes the perceptions and opinions of those who will be affected by school-based decisions into consideration during all phases of the process. This type of leadership, when used in an ethical manner, should synchronize the efforts of school and community to promote social justice and

democracy. Principals who practice inclusive leadership are willing to accept criticism of traditions and rituals as others are invited to participate in shared decision-making (Freeman, 1999).

Today's educational leaders must be extraordinary in order to ensure that students have teachers who demonstrate an appreciation for teaching and learning. Administrators must deviate from traditional norms of leadership in favor of methods that value and respect the suggestions of staff members. Inclusive leadership is one of many styles that allow school stakeholders to play an active role in the overall operation of the school. Schools are traditionally designed to promote vertical coordination where "higher levels coordinate and control the work of subordinates through authority, rules and policies, planning and control systems" (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 50). As democratic as Dewey (1916) hoped that our society and schools would become, the majority of American schools continue to promote societal stratification and bureaucratic ideals that include divisions of labor through positions that are assigned varying degrees of power. Sergiovanni (2000a) reveals that the nature of leadership needs to change in order to best serve our children,

Schools are places where children and young people struggle to achieve the necessary developmental growth, intellectual knowledge, practical skills, habits of mind, and character traits that get them ready for engaging in a lifetime of leading and learning. The presence of children and young adults in a learning and developing environment and the responsibility that schools have to serve these students as well are still other characteristics that make schools unique and that require us to view school leadership differently. Ordinary images of how to organize, provide leadership and support, motivate, and ensure accountability just do not seem to fit schools very well. (p. 167)

Inclusive leadership demands that teachers and administrators share a common vision for the school, recognizes that the talents of each are not mutually exclusive, and takes an

active role in ensuring that student success is realized. This leadership style distributes the responsibility for implementing the prescribed academic program to everyone involved in the educational program instead of being delegated only to teachers (Ryan, 2006). The sense of “we are in this together” is not merely a mantra for educators who utilize collaborative methods, but a charge that unites their concerted efforts. This shared interest promotes the feeling that teaching and learning will occur despite external scrutiny from the public and internal pressure from district offices and critics within the school building. Not only do students benefit from schools where teachers and administrators hold shared beliefs and interests, all stakeholders are empowered as everyone grows personally and professionally as well. In turn, staff and community are recognized as partners and are given autonomy to use their judgment in realizing the long and short term goals established by the school.

Sergiovanni (2000b) asserts that power exists in two forms – “power over” and “power to” (p. 281). “Power over” characterizes the more traditional form of leadership and is comprised of administrative actions that prove that teachers’ abilities and opinions are not valued. Administrators who practice this form of leadership micromanage and attempt to control every aspect of schooling including what teachers teach, when teaching occurs, and how subjects are taught. Teachers and their unique ways of teaching are not appreciated by the leader who employs “power over” methods nor do they value the contributions that teachers can make to teaching and learning. Leaders who believe that the goals of the school can only be realized through mutual consideration and cooperation subscribe to “power to” means for building positive relationships with teachers. According to Sergiovanni (2000b), “when empowerment is successfully practiced,

administrators exchange power *over* for power *to*” (p. 280). He further asserts that anyone with positional power can employ “power over” methods, but only those persons who are truly dedicated to the goals and mission of the school can be involved in “power to” ideals.

Teachers who are encouraged to participate in site-based management are more likely to take ownership for the entire educational program and are more likely to state that they are satisfied with their jobs. In *A Place Called School* Goodlad (1984) reported that frustration and dissatisfaction were the most common reasons teachers gave for considering leaving their jobs. Blase and Blase (1994) asked teachers in shared governance schools about how principals contributed to their empowerment. Teachers noted several positive qualities in principal behaviors that enhanced their self-esteem and satisfaction. Principals in these schools possessed a willingness to listen, fostered collaboration, and were accessible to their staffs. The teachers stated that they would accept responsibility and power in the school as a result of the positive behavior exhibited by their principals. Shared goals, an ethic of care, respect, and mutual trust are a few of the characteristics of schools that employ to promote collegiality among teachers and administrators. Inclusive leadership, distributive leadership, and servant leadership are styles that have been attributed to principals and administrators who are female.

The Female as School Leader

According to Coleman (2003), the abundance of research that looks at gender and women in educational administration “stands alone, distinct from the mainstream” (p. 326) because gender is not widely considered as a component of leadership theory that warrants discussion (Coleman, 2003). Blackmore (1999) attributes the general lack of

interest in feminist theory (which greatly influences gender studies of female administrators) to the suppression of research of females in the educational community. Feminist theory advocates the empowerment of women who, even in the administrative role, are looked upon as inferior colleagues in this male-dominated position (Loder & Spillane, 2005).

Historically, women interested in school leadership have always faced various obstacles in obtaining this position. As early as the nineteenth century, barriers to leadership existed because of the prevailing stereotype of women as domestic beings. When men began to leave the teaching profession to accept jobs in business, women were placed in teaching positions (at a lower salary) in order to maintain the consistency of nurturing children inside of as well as outside of the home. Because schools of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries consisted of one room, female teachers were required to assume dual roles of teacher and administrator. These roles remained synonymous until around 1918 when school buildings were redesigned in order to replicate the structures of cost efficient businesses. Schools also underwent organizational changes that also replicated that of business. Men eventually returned to the profession to assume administrative positions and women remained teachers (Loder & Spillane, 2005). The gender-based, hierarchal structure of leadership created in the nineteenth century influences administrative roles today. Although more females are enrolling in leadership preparation programs, the majority of them will be assigned to elementary schools in order to oversee the nurturing and care of young students while their males counterparts are predominately placed in positions of leadership at the secondary level with older students (Ryan, 2006).

Sergiovanni (2000b) calls for leaders to guide their stakeholders in a morally-based manner (otherwise referred to as servant leadership) that “taps their emotions, appeals to their values, and responds to their connections with other people” (p. 270). Robert Greenleaf introduced the concept of servant leadership as a method in which leaders can prove to society that their work is worthy of recognition. If a leader demonstrates that his/her work is dedicated to serving others, he/she will build a relationship based on trust. As a result, society will view that person as a leader (Crippen, 2005). Sergiovanni references the work of Barth (1990) who suggests that schools should become a “community of learners” (p. 274) where adults as well as students are provided with a variety of opportunities to engage in learning activities. As “head learner” (p. 274), the principal is responsible for demonstrating behaviors he/she wants emulated by staff and students. Servant leadership has ten notable characteristics: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and community building (Crippen, 2005).

Leaders who practice servant leadership are great communicators and are attuned to their internal voices and the voices of others. Empathetic leaders understand and are sensitive to the needs of those they serve. The ability to assess problems and pose plausible solutions that may resolve institutional and personal issues is a trait of a leader who is a healer. The servant leader who is aware of him/herself as a leader takes the time to reflect and self-assess based on the comments of others and personal feelings. The ability to sway stakeholders’ opinions for the good of the school is another technique that is employed by servant leaders. Leaders who are able to look at the “big picture” and diffuse negative situations before major problems occur practice conceptualization and

foresight. The last three characteristics of servant leadership (stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community) are interrelated. Leaders are entrusted to take care of fiscal, operational, and the stakeholders' personal and professional needs. When leaders place people at the top of their agendas, staff members and the school community will be able to fulfill their desires and commitment to teaching and learning (Crippen, 2005).

Servant leadership is considered to be a leadership style preferred by female administrators (Hampel, 1988). Female researchers, including Shakeshaft (1987) conclude that male leaders focus on individual accomplishments as opposed to the more feminine approach of promoting collegiality and collaboration among others. According to Shakeshaft (1987), female leaders perceive their interactions with others as the key to the operation of the school. This is achieved by placing emphasis on cultivating relationships with other people; paying particular attention to teaching and learning; and exhibiting a style that facilitates community building. Coleman (2003) claims that women leaders possess attributes such as an ethic of care, tolerance, emotional, intuitiveness, and gentleness. The caring nature of women in leadership positions automatically gives them a "predisposition towards collaboration, empowerment, and teamwork" (Coleman, 2003, p. 333). Not only are women administrators thought to lead their staffs with a "servant's heart," their style has been associated with transformational leadership which is another leadership style that encourages, values, and respects input from those they have been entrusted to lead in decision making.

Transformational leaders promote distributed leadership by working with others in the school community to identify personal goals and then link these to the broader

organizational goals. Rather than a single individual—the principal—coordinating and controlling from above, transformational leadership focuses on stimulating change through bottom-up participation. Principals who practice transformational leadership seek multiple sources of leadership from members of their staff who create the conditions under which others are committed and self-motivated to work towards the improvement of the school without specific direction from above (Blase and Anderson, 1995).

Although Blackmore (1999) asserts that failure to examine the gender differences in male and female leadership promotes “gender blindness” which perpetuates hegemonic ideals, Shakeshaft (1987) believes that the true distinction between male and female administrators is not in a leadership style per se, but lies in their epistemologies or “ways of knowing”. Williamson and Hudson (2001) agree that leadership styles are not inherently feminine or masculine

Questions abound about whether or not there are gender differences in leadership styles and preferences...A further complication arises because those styles and preferences associated with the ‘feminine’ or the ‘feminist’ do not necessarily apply only to women. There are perhaps more women than men who fit the stereotype, but certainly there are women principals who match the masculine stereotype and men who believe and practice in ways consistent with the feminine. (pp. 4-5)

Regardless of one’s stance on leadership styles or preference of leaders based on gender, giving staff a voice in decision-making has been emphasized in the literature on effective leadership. Inclusiveness, shared vision, collaboration, and a sense of community are a few of the characteristics associated with administrators who are viewed favorably by those whom they lead. Blackmore (1999), Shakeshaft (1987), and others outline the disparities in the treatment of male and female leaders and obstacles female leaders face;

however, public perception has not been shown to deter female leaders who are determined to create schools containing community of learners.

Chapter Two outlined sources that were consulted in the professional literature to contextualize the study. School reform, segregated and urban education, culturally relevant pedagogy, teacher study groups, teacher efficacy, professional learning, and school leadership were discussed to show how these topics were applicable to the study. Procedures for data collection and analysis that were used to implement the study are outlined in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3

YOU WANT TO SEE THE WIZARD

At the core of feminist ideals is the crucial insight that there is no one truth, no one authority, no one objective method which leads to the production of pure knowledge. ...feminist knowledge is based on the premise that the experience of all human beings is valid and must not be excluded from our understandings... This is why patriarchal knowledge and the methods of producing it are a fundamental part of women's oppression, and why patriarchal knowledge must be challenged – and overruled. (Spender, 1985, pp. 5-6)

The purpose of this research study was to examine the contributing factors that influenced female, African-American teachers' perceptions of their instructional effectiveness in the classroom. Through their participation in a teacher study group, participants were asked to reflect upon their pedagogical practices and support their colleagues in addressing the academic needs of African-American students. Specifically, this study investigated the impact of the following external and internal factors on teacher attitudes in the area of literacy: professional learning, teacher efficacy, and administrative support. The findings of this research will be utilized to more adequately address the instructional needs of students and other educators of African-American children.

The formation of a teacher study group in the chosen setting sought to allow the participants to understand the dichotomy that exists between the prescribed curriculum and the needs of their African-American students in a non-threatening environment. The structure of the teacher study group also provided the participants with a variety of opportunities to give and seek support to and from persons who may have encountered

similar experiences. As African-American teachers discussed culturally relevant pedagogy, they became cognizant of hegemonic practices that have the potential to overshadow their moral purpose of educating African-American students (Delpit, 1988; Foster, 1997; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2000; Lynn, 1999). The teacher study group attempted to encourage teachers to be responsible for identifying inconsistencies in the taught curriculum, capitalize and develop their students' strengths, and find methods for bridging the two through analysis of student work and discussion of practical learning and teaching strategies. Participating in a study group that permitted teachers to become responsible for their own learning encouraged them to transfer this type of ownership to their students. Administrative and collegial support is vital to teachers of African-American students as they attempt to ameliorate social injustice through education. Current educators are held accountable for student performance on standardized and criterion-referenced assessments, and African-American teachers must ensure that their students demonstrate proficiency although many of them may contend with low literacy and numeracy abilities of students, lack of parental support, and interact daily with students who display an apathetic or nonchalant attitude towards education. The study group, used as an impetus for transformation and change, strived to give teachers the kind of intrinsic motivation that will propel them to empower themselves and their students.

This study evolved from a group of teachers at Flagg Elementary School who expressed concerns to the school's administrative team regarding the lack of professional development opportunities that addressed this school's specific needs. Many teachers at this school were in desperate need for didactic methods that were intended for their

students' academic growth. Teachers asked for my support because they either did not possess techniques for assisting students with low reading and mathematical abilities or their ability to differentiate instruction was very limited. As a result, a preliminary study was conducted in order to determine whether or not collaboration was a plausible tactic to alleviate some of the teachers' tension and frustration. During the pilot study, the majority of the participants shared that their teacher education programs assumed that reading and math specialists would be available to provide remedial instruction to their students who needed that type of support. In other words, teachers were very competent in teaching students who performed "on grade level," but destitute when low-performing students were assigned to their classes. One year after the pilot study was completed, I was transferred to Grant Elementary School. Grant Elementary is located within the same district and has similar demographics as Flagg Elementary. The major difference between the two schools is school size. Flagg Elementary School has an enrollment of approximately 430 students, whereas Grant Elementary School educates 1,022 students daily. Candid conversations with a different faculty (individually and collectively) revealed that the instructional challenges faced by the teachers at Flagg Elementary were not necessarily school-based, but indicative of a more common thread of the two schools – race and poverty.

Design of the Study

Qualitative methodology was chosen as the most appropriate paradigm for data collection for this investigation. Qualitative methods allow investigators to use a variety of sources in order to collect information empirically (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This investigation was structured in a manner that allowed the participants to collaborate in a

natural environment, and as I investigated teachers' perceptions and the need for instructional strategies to fit the needs of their students, qualitative methods were most appropriate. Establishing relationships with the participants required that inherently relational methods – interviews, observations, and group discussions were employed as forms of data collection. Data collection occurred unobtrusively as the participants developed strategies and participated in conversations about teaching and learning. Attempting to quantify this study may have potentially limited the scope of reporting the results to significance values, linear regression charts, etc. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Conversely, qualitative methods allow data analysis to be reliant upon a variety of sources such as interviews, journals, and observations. These techniques allowed me to document the participants' reactions to hegemonic practices and curricular conversations using “rich descriptions” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 10) that were most appropriate for capturing their insights and voices. The methods employed for this study were those most frequently used by feminist researchers as a means to document and report research findings on women in a manner that will “speak *out* for [them because we] cannot speak *for* [them]” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 16). Collins (2000) urges Black female researchers to structure data collection and analysis in a manner that challenges traditional methodologies and means that have ignored women of color because of their gender and race. Critical race theory was also considered when selecting the methods for this study. Dixon (2006) asks researchers using this lens to remain cognizant of the following questions when planning data collection:

1. What does research look like when the researcher sees herself as part of the community in which she collects data?

2. What can she learn when she is able to ask the intimate, “hard” questions about race and racism?
 3. What insight can she bring to the data analysis when, in some ways, she understands that answering those questions is difficult, but necessary?
- (p. 214).

Paying attention to these questions forces the researcher to view him/herself as a member of the community in which he/she is studying and forms a mutually inclusive relationship between the research site and the researcher (Dixson, 2006).

The environment used for data collection was structured in a manner that was most conducive for naturalistic inquiry. LeCompte, Schensul, Weeks, and Singer (1999) suggest that participant observers are able to collect data through his or her “engagement with them [participants]” (p. 8). Results were reported from the information gleaned from individual and focus group interviews; fieldnotes; participant journals; video and audio recordings of the meetings; and an open-ended questionnaire that was completed at the beginning of the study. Data sources were chosen purposely and aligned to answer the research questions. In order to capture the participants of this study in a naturalistic setting, data collection provided “detailed textual description that conveys a sense of history culture, politics, and the social position of the group under study vis-à-vis the larger society and its institutions” (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, p. 5). Any information that was transcribed and analyzed was also verified by the participants for accuracy to ensure that themes and thoughts were reported accurately.

Guiding Questions

Using a qualitative design, the questions that were investigated were structured in a manner that allowed me to fully understand the nature of a female, African-American teacher study group. Dixon (2006) cautions researchers to design questions with deliberate thought; therefore, this study will be guided by the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of an African-American teacher study group?
2. What are the topics and themes discussed in an African-American teacher study group that is focused on “culturally relevant pedagogy”?
3. How does participation in a teacher study group inform the participants’ views about (a) literacy and the literacy curriculum and (b) their teaching practices?
4. According to the study group participants, how does the African-American teacher study group compare to other professional development experiences in facilitating their growth as learners?
5. How might the participation of a school administrator in a teacher study group assist teachers in their professional growth?

The research period began with five research questions; however, question three originally read, “How does participation in a teacher study group inform the participants’ views about literacy, the literacy curriculum, their teaching practices, and themselves as learners?” I decided to combine the literacy components of this question in order to specifically address the participants’ perspectives of the impact of the teacher study group on reading pedagogy and teaching methods as distinct components of the instructional program. In order for teachers to reflect on themselves as learners, I modified question four to include their perceptions on the teacher study group as a learning tool.

Role of the Researcher

I was the principal investigator as well as the assistant principal of the school; therefore, my role can be most closely identified with that of a participant observer. Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999) define the participant-observers role as an ethnographic method that “requires the researcher to be present at, involved in, and recording the routine daily activities with people in the field setting” (p. 91). I have also been designated as the school’s professional learning liaison which gives me the responsibility of coordinating activities with human and financial resources that will enhance teacher performance. My role can be most associated with that of a change agent as I attempted to guide (and be guided by) teachers through a transformation process that will be beneficial to their students. In this respect, I was a concerned researcher and learner who wanted teachers and students to be positively impacted by this study.

My former experiences as a classroom teacher, math instructor, and reading specialist permitted me to intermittently contribute to the conversations of the teachers. I took a critical approach to qualitative inquiry as I hoped to introduce teaching methods and practices that were engaging to the teachers and their students. My role also provided me with insider privileges as I asked the participants of the study sensitive questions about their current teaching practices that may be inconsistent with state and district policies and guidelines. I conducted the initial study group in order to demonstrate how subsequent sessions would be structured. After that session, individual teachers hosted the remaining meetings and served as the facilitator.

Throughout my career as an educator I vowed that my students would be provided with numerous opportunities to succeed, and this philosophy has been shared with

teachers whom I supervise. My bias is deep-rooted in the belief that Black children can and will succeed in classrooms where teachers care about them. Giving teachers the authority to control the nature of the discussions during the study gave me the opportunity to become a participant-observer and reduced my power and bias throughout the course of the study. The participants respected my role as an administrator of the school, but their reliance on me as the sole resource for solutions dissipated as I consistently deferred their questions to their colleagues. I remained conscious my potential bias and employed member checking to ensure that the teachers were represented correctly in my reporting. Any information concerning the group or group members reported in the last three chapters were not included in the final manuscript until I received oral or written consent from the teacher study group members.

My Interest in African-American Teacher Study Groups

My interest in establishing an African-American teacher study group emerged from a pilot study in which only African-American teachers volunteered to participate. The absence of previous studies on teacher study groups comprised solely of African-Americans supported my desire to further and more systematically engage in this work. As I attempted to situate my study in theory, I was exposed to various writings concerning critical race theory (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, 1999; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001), feminist theory (Belenky et al., 1997; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994), sociocultural theory (Gee, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1986) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Delpit, 1988; Foster, 1997; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2000; Lynn, 1999). I realized that African-

American teachers need additional support in the form of professional development and support from school administrators.

My position in the school gave me insight and access to information that has the potential to transform the teaching methods of teachers of African-American students that may be unavailable to other researchers. I have met with the building's strategic planning team, district reading coordinators, and local university professors to determine the most effective means that teachers can employ that embraces cultural diversity, yet prepare our students for a society in which "standards" for acceptable speaking, reading, and writing exist. My concern about the professional growth of the teachers with whom I interact daily was the catalyst that prompted the formation of the initial teacher study group, and I felt that the positive feedback that I received from the teachers and my observations of their use of culturally-relevant methods of teaching warranted the formation of a teacher study group in another setting. Forming a teacher study group was the most feasible method for allowing interested persons to examine the research of experts in the field.

My Role as Administrator in the Study's Site

My positional power in the school may have attracted some teachers to the study while deterring others from participating. I believe that in spite of my supervisory role in the structural hierarchy of the school, I consider myself to be a teacher-leader whose primary responsibility is to remain available to teachers' instructional needs. Participants did not receive preferential treatment nor were non-participants penalized for not taking part in the study. To assure the educational community that all teachers were treated fairly, I chose not to be the primary evaluator of any of the participants' performance in the classroom.

Teachers expressed an appreciation for my presence and participation in the teacher study group pilot study (West, 2005), and I concur that relationships between the participants and me were strengthened by our concerted efforts to help our students. When the pilot study initially began, the teachers were apprehensive about sharing their perceptions in my presence, but I assured them that their comments would remain anonymous when I reported the data. In addition, confidentiality was discussed in the guidelines that were established for the study group. I have built a relationship of trust with the staff at Grant Elementary School, and I made it explicitly clear that this trust would transcend to the teacher study group.

Setting

This qualitative study took place in Grant Elementary School which is an urban, metropolitan school located in the southeast region of the United States. The school is nestled between a busy street and a railroad track on land that was donated by a philanthropist in 1881. The school, like the town in which it is located, has undergone renovations to accommodate the growth in population. In 1948, Grant Elementary School had 212 students, and at the time of the study 1,022 students in pre-kindergarten through fifth grades were educated there. Sidewalks have been added on the main streets of the community in order for pedestrians and students to walk safely to and from their destinations. The school was led by one principal and two assistant principals. Three counselors also assisted on the administrative team. The reminder of the staff consisted of 108 certified and classified personnel who were dedicated to the instructional program of Grant Elementary School, and one staff member attended Grant Elementary School as a student. Teachers represented four ethnic groups, African-Americans (85.2%), Latino

(.9%), European-American (9.3%), and Black (non-American) (4.6%). Students were most likely to receive instruction from a female teacher than a male at Grant Elementary School due to the large percentage of female teachers (93.7%) who were employed there as compared to males (6.3%) in the same position. Students represented five ethnic groups, African-American (95.6%), Latino-American (1.5%), American Indian (0.1%), European-American (0.2%), and Multi-racial (2.6%).

Family economic status ranged from those persons who receive government assistance (69.84%) to those who are considered to be members of the upper class (4.3%) as determined by demographic information provided by the district. Many households (94%) were maintained by single parents or parents who have been adversely affected by a national decline in the economy, thus the school participates in federally supported breakfast and lunch programs. Approximately 69.84% of the students at Grant Elementary school received free and reduced lunch which enabled the school to distribute resources funded by Title I among every student in the building. The mission of the school attests to the desire to increase student achievement while simultaneously addressing the affective needs of the students that may or may not be addressed in the district's curriculum.

As the assistant principal of the school where this study occurred, I have gained entry into the research site; however, before this study commenced, I scheduled a meeting with the school's principal to discuss gaining permission to conduct the study and the specific dates. I also submitted a copy of my prospectus to the district's director of Research and Evaluation, and once my *Permission to Conduct Research* packet was approved, the director of this department gave me written consent for the study to

commence. In order to fulfill the requirements of my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), the district letter was submitted as a component of my IRB packet for the university. Once permission was granted to conduct the research by Georgia State, the investigation began.

Selection of Participants

Participant recruitment occurred during faculty meetings and via electronic mailing through the district's intranet communication system. I chose the participants based on their desire to gain additional insight on practical means of enriching teaching and learning. Because I am employed at the same site as the participants, a convenience sample was used. In these communications with the staff, all teachers were apprised of the following:

1. This study evolved from concerns that have been expressed to the school's administrative team; however, data collected from the participants in this study will be used to as a component of the principal investigator's graduate coursework, and
2. Interested persons will respond to me via school e-mail.

Participants

Convenience sampling (Merriam, 1998) was used in order to select the participants because the site of the study was an elementary school where I have been assigned as the assistant principal. Purposive sampling was used to target African-American teachers and to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My supervisory role of the participants prevented me from being "fully identified with members of the group under study" (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, p. 71);

however, I have membership in the group because of my affiliation with the participants as a female, African-American educator. My pilot study (West, 2005) consisted exclusively of African-American teachers and this investigation targeted the same population; however, participants in the study met the following criteria:

1. The teachers had to be African-American females and
2. The teachers had to have obtained (or be enrolled in a graduate program to obtain) a degree in Educational Leadership.

This population was targeted for this study because of the evolving role of the administrator as an instructional leader and change agent in schools. Prospective school leaders must understand the importance of collaboration among teachers and inclusive leadership as well as how educational research in the area of literacy can inform teaching methods used in the classroom. I have found that aspiring leaders are more likely to become empowered and in return, empower their colleagues and other members of the educational community who may not be members of the group. Nine teachers in the school were eligible to participate, and all of them attended the interest meeting after receiving a copy of my invitation (see Appendix A).

The participants' educational experiences and teaching experience ranged from one teacher who was currently in her eighth year of teaching to our quiet, but powerful veteran who (at the time of the study) was completing her 18th year in education. All of the participants (including myself) were enrolled in an academic program to obtain a degree higher than the Master of Education. Teachers in Grant Elementary School were assigned there because at least one of the three administrators recommended them for

employment based on previous experiences in education and/or an interview in which they demonstrated knowledge of appropriate approaches to teaching and learning.

Teacher Study Group Guidelines

Specific guidelines governed the teacher study group for the purposes of this study, and we discussed the following procedures (teachers were provided with a written copy for their records) during the first teacher study group:

1. The purpose of this group was to allow participants to engage in open, honest dialogue about the teaching profession and investigate factors such as staff development, efficacy, and administrative support which may influence instruction. Not only will issues be discussed, but participants are expected to express possible solutions to these challenges as well;
2. Members of this group discussed current issues and practices that affect instructional methodology and pedagogy in their reading of a researcher-selected text, Ladson-Billings' (1994) *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Students*; and
3. Participation was a five-month commitment that is voluntary in nature due to meeting times that extended beyond the school day in which the teachers were not financially compensated; however, each participant received one (1) professional learning unit (PLU) for attending all sessions.

During the first meeting of the teacher study group, confidentiality was discussed; a letter explaining the study (see Appendix B) was distributed to each participant; consent forms were signed (see Appendix C); and demographic questionnaires (see Appendix D) were completed. The participants developed a schedule (see Appendix E) and

brainstormed specific topics to be discussed, and the facilitators for each session were identified.

Ladson-Billings' (1994) *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children* was the primary text studied by the group because the author gives practical examples of how teachers of African-American students immerse their students in experiences that meet the curriculum standards, yet embrace their culture and academic ability. During the pilot study (West, 2005), the group determined that their knowledge of pedagogical practices for teaching Black students was limited and teachers at Grant Elementary School reported that they also needed additional strategies for instructing Black students under their tutelage as well. Selected participants were assigned to research and disseminate texts that support the student work discussed in the group. Before each session, the participants completed readings that involved educational issues. The designated facilitator for each session guided each meeting in which the participants were asked to share their thoughts and/or experiences related to the topic of discussion. At the conclusion of each meeting, the participants had time to express their thoughts through a writing exercise using their individual journals. They also had the option of either sharing these journal entries with the group at the next meeting, or using their notes as reflection tools as they deemed appropriate. The final activity of the group was completing course evaluations and transcripts. These documents were required by the district's Department of Professional Learning in order for them to receive one (1) PLU toward renewing their Georgia educator certificates.

Data Sources and Data Collection Methods

Data sources were chosen deliberately and aligned to answer the research questions. As a participant-observer, I collected data through the use of audiotaped and videotaped study group sessions; in-depth, semi-structured interviews; fieldnotes from the study group sessions; fieldnotes from classroom observations of the participants; participant journals, peer debriefing; and a researcher's journal. Figure 2 illustrates the data sources.

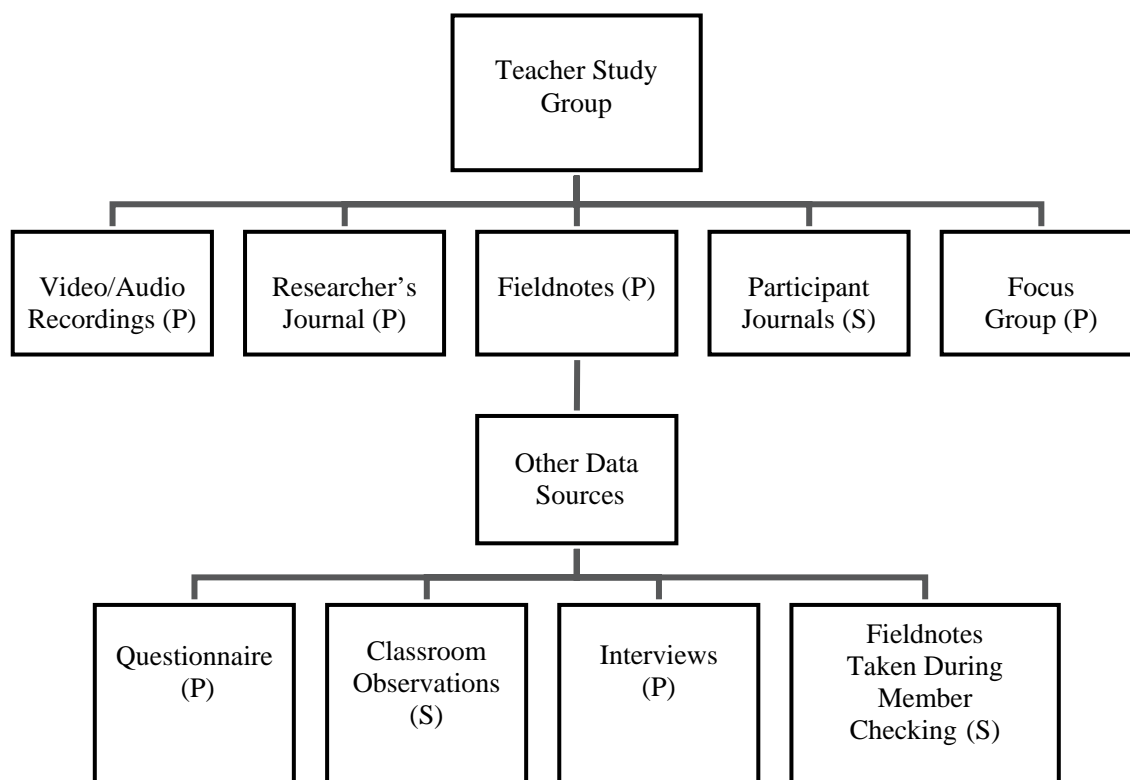


Figure 2. Sources used for data collection. (P) indicates a primary source and (S) indicates a secondary source.

Video/Audio Recordings of Meetings. Interviews and the recordings of the meetings were transcribed and shared with the participants prior to submission of the final report to ensure that the information has been transcribed accurately. Video recording served as a

back-up method for the anecdotal records to ensure that gestures and other non-verbal cues were included in the research report. Recording meetings was beneficial as a source of obtaining accurate data for later transcription (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). Videotaped data was not recommended for interviews because this method breaches anonymity; however, this technique was useful to capture behaviors of the participants and “provide insights into cultural phenomena in order to better understand human behavior within the context of culture and ... to design interventions to effect individual and/or cultural change” (Schensul, LeCompte, Nastasi, & Borgatti, 1999, p.40). James (1985) suggests that female researchers supplement “verbal communication in interviews, with attention to nonverbal communication, since ‘often members of a subordinate group cannot clearly articulate their frustrations and discontents [which] may be expressed in inchoate ways such as laughter’” (cited in Reinhartz, 1992, p. 20). Audio transcriptions were revisited several times and transcribed verbatim. Video recordings were selectively transcribed while being viewed to confirm identified themes and notate non-verbal gestures.

In-depth, open-ended interviews. Two types of interviews were used in this study: interviews with each member of the study group and one focus group interview at the conclusion of the study. All participants were interviewed twice. The first interview addressed their backgrounds, professional development experiences, and perceptions of what should be discussed in the study group. (See Appendix G for actual questions.) The first rounds of interviews were conducted at the school; however, two of the participants completed the second interview at their homes and another participant came to my home. Questions asked during the focus group interview allowed me to gain insight on the

benefits of the teacher study group and how my participation influenced (or did not influence) the nature of the conversations. (See Appendix H for actual questions.) Participants were also asked about their views on literacy, the literacy curriculum, their teaching practices, and themselves as learners in the context of the teacher study group. Additional information regarding the participants' personal history was collected in order for their profiles to be written. (See Appendix I for questions.) Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999) suggest that interviews benefit ethnographic research in two ways. First, detailed information can be obtained in order for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the topic being investigated. Secondly, open-ended questions permits interviewer to accept all responses pertaining to the study. Interviewing as a method of data collection is supported by Reinharz (1992) as a means for participants to establish a "sense of connectedness" (p. 20). Focus group interviews are group interviews that depend on the interactions of the participants in order to gain insights on phenomena. Although this method of data collection is qualitative in nature, researchers rarely rely on this technique alone (Patton, 1990). Guba (1981) encourages researchers to use focus groups in order to establish trustworthiness of the study, and this method also allows researchers to conduct member checks of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1996).

Fieldnotes. Fieldnotes and selective transcription of videotapes and audiotapes were used to record observations made that encapsulated the setting as well as other details that was not evident in audio and videotaping. Fieldnotes consisted of descriptions of the meeting room; facial expressions and body language of the participants; non-verbal gestures such as raising of hands to speak, nodding, smiling, frowning, etc.; and conversations that addressed a research question. Fieldnotes,

according to Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999), may reveal patterns that may be otherwise overlooked. Fieldnotes also made coding and analyzing data easier. I also used field notes in all classroom observations. (Each teacher had one unannounced visit in her classroom that lasted at least 20 minutes.)

Participants' journals. Participants who took notes about the readings or choose to chronicle their feelings were asked to consent to sharing their entries with the principal investigator. Although dialogue was encouraged, some members preferred to commit their thoughts to paper in their journals. Participant journals served as a process for teachers to reflect on group meetings to answer the overarching research question that asked whether or not teacher study groups are important for African-American teachers.

Peer debriefing. I solicited the input of a female, European-American doctoral student who was unfamiliar with the study to offer new insights to me that I may have overlooked due to my involvement in the project. This peer also clarified ambiguities in the study, provided feedback that enhanced the study, and ensured that the tone of my writing was not offensive to other ethnic groups.

Demographic questionnaire. During the first teacher study group meeting, each participant completed a questionnaire that provided personal information such as educational experience, degrees awarded, marital status, age, professional experience, and participation in school and social organizations. Having this information readily available enabled me to easily notice similarities and differences in the participants in this respect (see Appendix D).

Researcher's journal. As the primary investigator, I kept a log or a journal in which I recorded my initial impressions regarding data collection and analysis. I also used the journal as a place to record my analytic memos during the analysis process.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Critics of qualitative or naturalistic approaches state that the very nature of this paradigm is not guided by rigorous criteria, and it is “merely subjective” and “sloppy research” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 289). Qualitative researchers have countered these claims by establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the goodness criteria (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and parallel traditional terms (Schwandt, 1997) as frameworks to ensure that qualitative research has standards for researchers to follow. In order to distance qualitative research from that from the positivist paradigm, Lincoln and Guba (1985) have paralleled the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability with the positivists’ criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity, respectively.

Creswell (2003) suggests that researchers begin their investigations by deciding specifically what phenomena that they want to investigate and how they will investigate it. For this study, I decided that qualitative methods were best suited to study the teachers who will participate in the teacher study group. Creswell also states that the researcher should design the research methodology to address the research problem and questions that he/she wants answered during the research period. Each of these methods ensures the credibility and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the study which is contingent upon the adoption of appropriate research methods, examination of the previous research, etc. to frame findings.

Credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that ensuring credibility is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness as the researcher seeks to present an accurate portrayal of the events under investigation. Triangulation uses different methods (i.e., interviews, questionnaires, observation, surveys, etc.), multiple sources, and multiple “informants” (p. 307) to “build a coherent justification of themes” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). I triangulated methods by conducting interviews, peer debriefing, and observations. I also triangulated sources by conducting multiple interviews. Triangulation is employed to strengthen the study and provide support for the weaknesses inherent in each method of data collection that would limit the scope of the student if used in isolation.

Peer debriefing and member checks are also measures that Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that qualitative researchers utilize for credibility purposes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) named member checks as the single most important component of establishing a study’s credibility. Member checks occurred on a continual basis throughout the investigation as recommended by Merriam (1998) and this gave participants the opportunity to read transcripts of recordings to verify that transcripts accurately depicted what was said during our interviews and focus group discussions. Participants had an opportunity to clarify any statements that were unclear, verify emerging themes, and provide additional information. Credibility is crucial to trustworthiness; however, readers of research must also make a decision concerning the transferability of the study as well.

Transferability. Thick description is the lone technique that Lincoln and Guba (1985) attribute to a study’s transferability. Transferability, according to the authors, is

contingent upon the researcher providing enough details and contextual information about the site of inquiry that the reader can make a connection between the field site and to another setting that is familiar to the reader. Because reading is a decontextualized process, I used the transcriptions of the sessions and interviews, participant and researcher journals, and the demographic questionnaire in order to provide “thick description” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316) that allowed the reader to “determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence, whether findings can be transferred” (Merriam, 1998, p. 211). Chapter 3 of this study provides readers with detailed information about the research setting, the participants, methods of data collection, and the length of time in which the data were collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is attributed to the research of persons who provide detailed, thick descriptions of the study. The importance of providing details is crucial to both transferability and the dependability.

Dependability and confirmability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that credibility cannot exist without dependability; therefore, overlapping methods (triangulation) is as important to dependability as it is to credibility. Natural inquiry methods should provide enough detail to allow a future researcher to repeat the investigation although they may obtain different results (Merriam, 1998). I took measures to ensure that the findings that emerged from the data and were not influenced by my own biases in order to establish confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I admitted my own beliefs and assumptions that may have impacted the results or findings.

Data Analysis

Merriam (1998) claims that the purpose of data analysis is to arrange the data in a manner that will make “sense” (p. 178). She also states that “making sense out of the data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read – it is the process of making meaning” (p. 178). Employing qualitative methods to collect data for this study necessitated that I used analysis techniques that accurately conveyed the participants’ passion for the topics discussed by entwining their words or “voices” with themes that emerged. Constant comparison and grounded theory techniques guided data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Fieldnotes and selectively transcribed audiotapes and videotapes (from the teacher study group) were read repeatedly, analyzed inductively, and categorized by themes. In order to ensure that the research questions were answered, I viewed each videotaped teacher study group five times. The first time I viewed the tape, I paid particular to body language, word choice, and other actions of the participants that I could attribute to their comfort in being involved in an African-American teacher study group. I wrote notes on large Post-it notes and later affixed these notes on a 2.5 ft by 2.08 ft Post-it poster sheet that was labeled *Characteristics*. (This procedure is outlined further below.) I repeated this process for each of the remaining research questions until I felt that I had sufficient data that would accurately depict the findings.

Microsoft Office Word was used to type and add line numbers to transcriptions from each interview as a data management technique. I printed out the transcriptions and selected a different color (green, yellow, orange, purple, and pink) to represent each research question and highlighted portions of the transcript that was most appropriate for

each question. I wanted to make sure that I did not need to refer back to the original documents to determine who provided certain quotes; therefore, I assigned reference information to each piece of information. I wrote the participant's name, the data source (individual interview-I1, line# or I2, line#; focus group-FG, line number; classroom observation-CO; fieldnotes-FN; participant journal-PJ; researcher's journal-RJ; or teacher study group-TSG#), and the date of data collection. The inclusion of line numbers in the transcriptions allowed me to be able to locate the context for the comment in the original document if necessary. For example, if Tina made a statement appropriate for a research question, I isolated that quote from in the Word document by adding spaces before and after the desired quote, highlight the entire quote in yellow, and write "Tina/TSG3/4.16.07" in the space above the highlighted information. The highlighted piece of information was then cut and placed on one of five Post-it poster sheets that were affixed on a wall according to its relevance to a research question. (Each Post-it poster sheet represented a different research question.) This placed the data easily at my disposal and enabled me to manipulate chunks of data. If a quote could fit easily into two research questions, I reviewed the videotape of that particular meeting to listen to the conversation preceding the particular quote or revisited the transcript from the interview to determine the best fit for the data. After the quotes were categorized, I typed information from my researcher's journal and added this information to my poster sheets as well.

In addition, journal entries were analyzed inductively and coded by the researcher. To ensure that I reported information accurately, member checking was used at various points throughout the study. This method prohibited my vested interest in the project from overshadowing the true thoughts and perceptions of the participants. I

followed the steps outlined by LeCompte and Schensul (1999) that would “attach meaning and significance to the patterns, themes, and connections that the researcher has identified during analysis; explain why they have come to exist; and indicate what implications they might have for future actions” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 5). These techniques allowed me to answer the research questions through coding the responses using the NUDIST program to organize the data from the individual and focus group interviews. (Video and audiotapes from the teacher study group were selectively transcribed; therefore, I used Microsoft Office Word to manage this data.) Data reduction charts also assisted in organization and conclusions were drawn from this pictorial representation of the data.

The research questions guided the analysis, and data were organized according to themes and assigned codes. After all of the individual and focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim, all codes were managed using NUDIST software. With this program, new codes could be assigned at the same time as identified codes were operationalized. The purpose of coding raw data was to place the raw information into categories (themes) for easier analysis. Another method that was used involved cutting and pasting similar quotations from interviews, participant journals, and teacher study group meetings on sheets of paper. A contingency table was used to display commonalities and differences in the data. This technique allowed the responses or observations of more than one participant to be displayed at one time (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

My second research question involved identifying themes/categories that crystallized as a result of the discussions of the group. In order to determine the themes, I

viewed and reviewed videotapes of the TSG sessions (audiotape was available as a back-up if necessary) and looked at fieldnotes recorded in my researcher's journal. I listed the topics discussed during each meeting, and made notations (vertical lines) to indicate the number of occurrences of that same topic from previous meetings. Conversations of the participants, individual and focus interviews, and personal observations revealed eight common themes that were evident in the data provided by the participants (myself included). Member checking occurred in order for the participants to verify the categories. As I read each theme aloud to them, I provided them with evidence from their discussions to validate the selection of the particular theme. After all eight of the themes were discussed, I asked them if I omitted or needed to include additional information.

Shortly before the eighth teacher study group, I noticed I had not taken any notes pertaining to the research questions which addressed comparing the teacher study group with other professional development courses. I also realized that their opinions of my participation in the group did not appear in the conversations of the participants although they were asked about their feelings concerning my participation during the first interview. As a result, I asked these questions directly during the focus group and individually as I collected data during each participant's second interview. Once all of the research questions were answered to my satisfaction, I began writing up the study.

Writing Up the Study

The study was written in a manner that captured the voices of teachers who are currently teaching students in the age of standards-based education, accountability and *No Child Left Behind*. Data excerpts were transcribed verbatim and edited for pauses and hesitations before inclusion in the final document. Meeting with my advisor and using my

instincts as an educator and researcher led me to revisit the manner in which I would report the information gathered during data collection. During data analysis I discovered that I wanted readers of my work to clearly see the diversity of the teachers who describe themselves as African-Americans. Although the ethnicities of the participants are the same, African-American, female teachers are not a monolithic group. (This same argument was made earlier in Chapter 2.) I also remained cognizant that my results may have been shaped by the fact that the participants were teacher-leaders who were willing to take risks in their personal and professional growth. These teachers were a group of educators who found that their participation in the study was mutually beneficial to them and to me. As I immersed myself in the data, I realized that the experiences of this veteran cadre of teachers yielded findings that may not have materialized if novice teachers had been included in the study.

As my relationship with the teachers developed, I discovered that I had a strong desire for readers to view these powerful women as torchbearers for their 190 pupils, not merely as participants in this study. As a result, I added four questions that were of a more personal nature to the second individual interviews to capture the essence and experiences of the participants. Questions included those about their parent(s) and sibling(s); the emphasis their parent(s)/guardian(s) placed on education; and their childhood experiences with literacy. One participant asked that I not reveal the sensitive nature of her childhood in this manuscript, but felt that this information would not only give me insight to her as an individual, but her commitment to the profession as well. Conversations revealed that the teachers had a variety of experiences and backgrounds; however, they were all lead to the same place – Grant Elementary School. Documenting

their journey to this place from childhood was imperative to “hearing” their unique voices and ensuring that this voice was heard. An additional chapter was added to describe their individual journeys and their individual contributions to the dynamics of the teacher study group, and my major advisor suggested that I consider reorganizing my research questions in a manner that would allow me to present the findings in a way that was conducive with this new direction.

Many of the students who enter our school are not mastering the prescribed curriculum and the teacher study group was a forum for educators to share their challenges and successes with one another. I wrote thick descriptions of the study group as a whole as well as portraits of the participants. I included information that will assist other educators whose demographics and settings are similar to the one being investigated. I made a concerted attempt to report the information given by the participants; however, I had the authority to decide which specific information that would be included in the study. The importance of this study to the field of education necessitates that I considered very carefully the political and social implications of the information that I decided to include when I reported the findings. In order to maintain the passion of my writing without blatantly offending other cultures, I solicited the assistance of another doctoral student (who wanted to participate in the teacher study group, but was excluded because she is European-American) as my peer reviewer.

Timeline for the Study

The research period occurred during Spring, 2007. Participant recruitment, selection, and the initial interviews were scheduled for January 2007, and the teacher study group meetings occurred twice per month from January 2007 until May 2007. The

time period allotted provided me with numerous opportunities to have formal and informal conversations with the participants through interviews, observations of their teaching, and participation in the study group meetings. Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently during the months of the study group meetings; however final interviews, data analysis, and writing occurred through Fall 2007 (see Table 1).

Table 1

Timeline for Data Collection

<i>Dates</i>	<i>Activities</i>
1/07	Recruited participants for teacher study group Data collection began Demographic questionnaire with all group members Interview #1 with all group members Data analysis began
1/07 – 5/07	Teacher study group meetings began and continued bimonthly Classroom observations Ongoing data collection and analysis
5/07 – 6/07	Interview #2 with all group members Member checking Ongoing data collection and analysis Focus group Final data collection Data collection and analysis Drafting of research report
7/07 – 10/07	Final data analysis and drafting Finished final draft of research report

CHAPTER 4

JOURNEYS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

'Cause there maybe times, when you think you lost your mind. And the steps you're takin' leave you three, four steps behind. But the road you're walking might be long sometime. You just keep on steppin' and you'll just be fine! (from The Wiz)

The Wiz allowed movie viewers to gain insight into the various backgrounds and experiences of each character. Dorothy was a teacher from Harlem; Scarecrow lived in a corn field and was terrorized daily by crows that berated him and made him sing *You Can't Win* (Smalls, 1978) for their entertainment; Tin Man was discarded metal at an abandoned carnival site; and Lion hid inside of a stone statue in front of a library.

Exploring the unfortunate circumstances that necessitated the characters' journey down the yellow brick road allowed viewers to understand the situations that contributed to their feelings of desolation and incompleteness. Similarly, the participants in the teacher study group shared their respective triumphs and hardships in their efforts to educate children. Some of them also admitted that their journeys down the yellow brick road were difficult, but people were placed into their paths who encouraged them along the way. In order for readers to understand these educators' passion of and commitment to teaching, leading, and learning, this section has been designed in a manner that details their personal and professional lives as well as the results of the teacher study group.

Five questions provided direction for this study. Data collection and analysis supported the use of these original questions after the participants engaged in nine study group sessions, one classroom observation, two individual interviews, and one focus group interview. The questions are as follows:

1. What are the characteristics of an African-American teacher study group?
2. What are the topics and themes discussed in an African-American teacher study group that is focused on “culturally relevant pedagogy”?
3. How does participation in a teacher study group inform the participants’ views about (a) literacy and the literacy curriculum and (b) their teaching practices?
4. According to the study group participants, how does the African-American teacher study group compare to other professional development experiences in facilitating their growth as learners?
5. How might the participation of a school administrator in a teacher study group assist teachers in their professional growth?

The first question will be addressed in this chapter and results from the final four research questions will be presented in the next chapter. As data excerpts are included in this and the subsequent two chapters, the following abbreviations will continue to be used to identify data sources: (1) individual interview-I1, line# or I2, line#; (2) focus group-FG, line#; (3) classroom observation-CO; (4) fieldnotes-FN; (5) participant journal-PJ; (6) researcher’s journal-RJ; and (7) teacher study group-TSG#. The participant’s name will precede the data source and the date of data collection will follow the data source [e.g., Holly/I2,113-116/6.26.07].

The chapter opens with a portrait of each participant which chronicles her childhood experiences with school and literacy, familial involvement in education, a personal reflection of influential factors on her teaching, and her reason(s) for joining the teacher study group. Next, the characteristics of an African-American teacher study group that made this type of professional learning activity unique are described.

Profiles of the Participants

Profile of Tina

Tina is an 18-year veteran teacher who was born in a Midwestern state. She attended a university in her home state; however, her Master of Arts and Educational Specialist degrees were awarded by institutions outside of the state in which she now resides. Tina is a former teacher of the year and is a married mother of two children. During the research period she taught second grade, but her teaching experience includes kindergarten as well. She has served as grade level chairperson, teacher of the year co-chairperson, and a member of the media and technology committee. Her professional affiliation includes memberships in a local and national teacher organization. After the second teacher study group, I pulled Tina aside to discuss what I perceived as her lack of confidence. As I reviewed the transcripts of her first interview, I detected that she was uncomfortable. She admitted that she wanted to improve speaking to an audience comprised solely of adults, and I told her that the teacher study group would be an excellent forum for improving this area. I also told her that she brought the most knowledge and experience to the group and she would be instrumental to the group's success. At the conclusion of our conversation, she thanked me for my concern and asked for my assistance in strengthening this area for personal growth (RJ/2.28.07). Tina

became the group's silent leader who seemed to absorb the conversations around her. Normally the first person to arrive, when she raised her hand to speak during group meetings, other members (including myself) yielded the floor to her in acknowledgement of her wealth of knowledge in the area of teaching and learning. We realized that her words would result in a powerful exchange in the group and this aspect of her leadership was respected by all members.

Tina's journey to the field of education was one that was filled with perseverance and determination. As the youngest child of six (and only female child), Tina was raised by her mother in a single-parent household where financial resources were scarce, but the desire for the children to receive an education was plentiful. She recalled that obtaining an education was very important to both of her parents because neither one of them graduated from high school "they wanted for me what they weren't able to obtain and they were very supportive...didn't have a lot to give, but they had a lot of encouragement for me" (I2,41-43/6.27.07). Tina was greatly influenced by her first-grade teacher who "show[ed] that she cared about me, did the nurturing thing...and it stood out over the years" (I2,13-14/6.27.07). An avid reader as a child and now as an adult, Tina credits public schools and libraries for fostering her love of reading. She admitted that her socioeconomic status prevented her from having access to a variety of print materials at home, but she spent a lot of time at public libraries and used every opportunity available to interact with text. As a result, Tina has formed a new tradition in her family – she has become the first college graduate (maternal and paternal sides included).

Tina has always wanted to be a teacher because of her positive experiences with teachers and school. These teachers shaped her thinking, protected her, and nurtured her

mind and her spirit. Tina reminisced, “I had some really good teachers in the past. Some people who cared about me, ...kinda took me under their wing and protected me and showed me the way – helped me when I needed it” (I1,31-33/2.21.07). She has transferred this type of dedication to her students because she embodies the values and traditions of education. When asked to describe herself as a teacher, she referred to her commitment to education, “I value my job, I take it seriously. When I come to work, it’s all about business. I like to be prepared...I like to have everything laid out and ready to go. Stay late, come early” (I1, 4-6/2.21.07). She is a very traditional teacher (CO/2.15.07) who believes that students need to master certain skills in order to be able to progress through subsequent grades without becoming academically frustrated. Tina became a teacher at Grant Elementary School six years after moving to Georgia, and during her tenure, she has encountered many students. Although she has taught only a small percentage of students whose socioeconomic status mirrors her own as a child, she does not allow lack of access of love or materials to prevent them from achieving academic success in her classroom. She attempts to

just try to be understanding...and help out when I can as far as...school supplies – I buy school supplies and have them for when they need it. Um, just being a little bit more um, just listening to them a little bit more and being more sympathetic. Being there when they need me. (I2,29-32/6.27.07)

Tina’s philosophy is also extended to other students who may have more financial privileges because her responsibility is to provide for all of her students regardless of their circumstances. Tina’s love of reading is reflected in her teaching, and she is adamant about her students’ becoming literate adults “I push for it really hard. I make time for it even though we have a structured day and you have a whole lot of time devoted to it throughout the day, but I make time” (I2,71-73/6.27.07). Time restraints

were named as an aspect of teaching that distresses Tina; however, she feels that her efforts are rewarded when she sees "...the joy...when the kid actually gets it [the concept of skill being taught]. ...when the light bulb comes on after working day in and day out you know, you can see that you've helped somebody" (I1,194-196/2.21.07). Tina uses her 18 years of teaching experience, professional learning opportunities, and her colleagues to continue her professional growth "...I take advantage of workshops during the summer,...talk to coworkers, do a lot of reading you know, on my own,...getting on the internet and searching for different ideas" (I1,64-66/2.21.07). Tina's desire to expand her knowledge base in the areas of teaching and learning prompted her to join the study group as a way to "broaden my horizons. To give me some ideas about...how to do things differently, to learn from other people..." (I1,163-165/2.21.07).

Profile of Holly

Holly has taught kindergarten, first, and second grades during her seven year tenure in education. She hails from a southern state and attended a historically Black college and university (HBCU) to receive a Bachelor of Arts degree in a field other than education. Holly concurrently teaches first grade and is pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy degree from a local university. She is divorced and finds time to co-chair Grant Elementary School's after-school enrichment program, facilitate our staff book club, maintain her memberships in teacher and research organizations as well as actively participates at the graduate level in a sorority established for Black women. Holly was the analyst of the group. Her legal background (she majored in paralegal studies with aspirations of attending law school) prepared her to think critically before she responded

and pose questions that challenged the group to think inductively and deductively about the field of education.

Holly and her two sisters were reared in a middle class household by her mother and father. Holly's mother, an educator, and father were dedicated to educating their daughters:

...my father was very active in myself and my two sisters' lives. He was the type of father that, if he was working too many hours he would change jobs and get a new job just so he would be home because to him, his family was important and [being] an active role model in his daughters' lives. We were important to him and with my mother...my mother being an educator it was...education was really big in my household too. Whereas we would spend the summers writing book reports or um, reading books and as a child you're like, "Why do we have to do this?" but now being an adult I appreciate that so much more. ...and I would say not even just from my parents too. I come from a very supportive family on both my mom and my dad's side, where not only did we get that type of love and support from my parents, but we also got it from my aunts and my uncles – even to this day, they are still very active in our lives. (I2,7-17/6.26.2007)

Holly's educational efforts were supported by her family, but her early memories of literacy and literacy instruction in school were not favorable. She attributes painful experiences with reading to White teachers' low expectations of Black students:

I don't think that I was a good reader, at all. I remember just by my parents telling me...I wasn't in the highest reading group, but that had a lot to do with where we were raised – I was raised in a predominately White area, so to them [White people], their expectations of where children should be [academically] I didn't fit the mold for them. And I think a lot of that, when I look back on my life and sometimes with the confidence of the things that I can do a lot of that has a lot to do with me being the only Black child in a classroom and them expecting me NOT to be able to do things. So, what I think for me...and now that I'm talking through it, I think that's why with my children [students] I don't make them think that they can't do something because my teachers made me feel like I could not, and because I felt like I could not do, then I didn't try as hard. ...I remember being in the lower reading group, and I think [laughs] which is weird because you look at me know and you're like, "Okay, how did you get in a lower reading group, and you're working on

your Ph.D.?” But then, that’s the driving support of my parents because if I had to rely on...the educators around me, I don’t think I would be where I am now. (I2,95-109/6.26.07)

Holly’s family held education in high regard, but as she entered into adulthood she did not understand the logic of friends and other family members (with a similar background to hers) who did not take advantage of education:

...that’s kinda like my struggle where I don’t understand where you all come from a family where education was so important because I remember growing up it wasn’t *if* you’re going to college, it’s *where* you’re going to college...So when I talk to some older adults or even like friends my age, they say, “Holly, you don’t realize how blessed you were because a lot of people didn’t get that.” And I’m just thinking it’s [going to college] the norm because that’s what I grew up with and a lot of my friends...I have a lot of friends that have a similar type background so when I meet someone, I (even my ex-husband) where he, you know, was the first one to go to college...it’s different. (I2,57-65/6.26.07)

After graduating from college, Holly worked in an attorney’s office. Her career in the judicial system was shorter than she anticipated because her childhood dream of becoming a teacher resurrected:

I always said that I wanted to be a kindergarten teacher, first-grade teacher, but I love to argue too [laughs] so that’s why I thought I was going to be an attorney, but then after looking at where my heart was, it wasn’t there ‘cause even when I worked in an attorney’s office, the passion wasn’t there. Whereas when I tell people now, I say I don’t regret going back to school to be certified [to become a teacher] because even on my worst day, I still enjoy my job. Whereas, there [the law office] on my worst day and best day I didn’t like what I was doing. (I2,133-139/6.26.07)

She also witnessed a large number of juveniles entering the penal system, and listened to an inner voice that nudged her to intervene in children’s lives at an early age in order to prevent their appearance in front of a judge as adolescents. Although Holly is optimistic for our future, she is also realistic “...And it’s not like I’m trying to save the world, but I

feel like if one child can be saved, then I've achieved what I wanted to do" (I1,41-42/2.01.07).

Holly recognized that she was puzzled by the lack of participation of her students' parents because of her own parents' commitment to education. In the beginning of her teaching career, Holly observed parents who were very involved in their children's education in the primary grades, but in recent years, parental involvement has declined tremendously. This observation has led her to revisit her role as a teacher. She admitted that she did not understand why parents would allow their children come to school without materials such as pencil and paper, homework, or a desire to learn. Upon further reflection, she discovered that she was "really not trying to understand why it happened, but more so frustrated with the situation itself" (I2,32-33/6.26.07). Teaching students who were dissimilar in so many ways from her prompted her to conduct research on the effects of caste on educative practices. She knowledgeable on Ruby Payne's theory concerning socioeconomics and has conducted workshops in order to assist other faculty members who struggle with relating to their students due to differences in social class. She attributes her love of reading for becoming more knowledgeable about understanding poverty:

...because I love reading, I have to go back and start reading information on lifestyles that are different from mine to get an understanding of it. So now it's more I'm...empathetic towards them and can understand it a little bit better, instead of saying, "Well, just because you don't have it doesn't mean..." Now it's like I'm beginning to understand the mindset behind it. So instead of being frustrated and accusing things, I kinda now, start picking up the slack where it's missing and say, "Okay, I know mom and dad are not gone do it, so this is what I need to start doing." (I2,38-44/6.26.07)

Holly is committed to reaching her students because of her own negative experiences with school. She ensures that her students are encouraged to succeed and utilizes other resources when assistance from parents is unavailable.

Holly knew that she wanted to work at Grant Elementary School during the interview with the current principal. She felt like the principal valued her opinions when Holly brought up the idea of starting a book club for the faculty and the principal told her that if she chose to work at Grant, the book club would be her responsibility. Holly describes herself as a reflective teacher who teaches according to the needs of the students and capitalizes on “teachable moments” instead of relying exclusively on the curriculum (CO/3.13.07). She spends numerous hours planning for her students and she’s trying to find the “balance between [her] personal and professional life” (I1,3-4/2.1.07) because she cares about her students, but has to manage her life outside of school as well. “Seeing that light bulb going off in a student – especially my low-performing students” (I1, 278-279/2.1.07) gives Holly her greatest satisfaction as an educator. On the other hand, she admits that the enormous amount of documentation that must be kept on each student presents challenges to her teaching:

...I just want to teach to be honest. If I could just teach, I think that I would be a better teacher, but with all of the paperwork that’s done and this is due and this is due I have to ask myself, “And that has to do with teaching because?” That’s my biggest stress. And sometimes I feel like I need a secretary just to do all of the paperwork. (I1, 298-312/2.1.07)

Holly considers herself to be a lifelong learner who is on a quest for knowledge. She constantly tries to improve her teaching by “...spend[ing] a lot of time reading literature on...if I have an issue with something, I’ll go out and find a resource book or go on the internet to see how I can assist myself” (I1,134-136/2.1.07). When asked why she

decided to join the teacher study group she replied, "...I am a professional student and just [wanted to] find out information on how to become a better teacher..." (I1,235-236/2.2.07).

Profile of Amber

Amber was the youngest member of the group, yet one of the most articulate and energetic. As a third-grade teacher with eight years of experience, she grew up and received her undergraduate degree in the same southeastern state. Amber was awarded a Master of Science degree via an on-line program and she is enrolled in a long distance doctoral program in order to further her studies in education. In addition to teaching third grade, she has also taught kindergarten and fourth grade as well. She is actively involved in her church, serves on the school's discipline committee, and assists with the school's dance team. The daughter of parents who attended two of the most elite HBCUs in the country, Amber and her brother grew up with middle class values and always understood the importance of education. Although she comes from a long line of teachers, Amber did not feel pressured to become an educator herself. Instead, here parents "placed a high emphasis on education" (I2,14/7.2.07) which she carried from childhood to adulthood. Amber's parents fostered a love of literacy by modeling and ensuring that she was engaged in a variety of activities at home:

...education was very important in my household. ...from 6-8 o'clock we were never allowed to watch television, we had to read and that was the rule until I graduated from high school, so I remember being in college like, "It's six o'clock and I'm watching t.v." I thought that was the most fascinating thing to me [laughs]. I mean they really – education was very, very, very important. And one thing too, my parents always, I always saw them reading. So I always, always loved reading because they always...the look on their face, they always seem so interested in whatever they were reading, and I wanted to be able to do that too. So, reading was very, very important in my household. (I2,35-43/7.2.07)

Amber is uncertain whether or not her parents' influence is beneficial to her teaching, but she attributes their emphasis on education to her passion for teaching and learning.

Amber's natural progression to education led her to public schools after college because of her difficulties with mathematics in towards the end of her elementary school career:

...when I was a child, math was very difficult for me and I remember having my 5th grade teacher to turn that around for me, and I really think that's when I decided to become a teacher to turn it around for another struggling child. (I1,19-21/1.22.07)

Although Amber left the profession for one year in order to become the director of a tutorial service, all of her work experience has been as a classroom teacher. As the director, she had opportunities to interact with middle school students through language arts instruction. When the company began to phase out the tutorial component, Amber decided to return to the classroom because she was not at the point of her career where she did not want any contact with students. She joined the staff at Grant Elementary after her stint at the tutorial service because "I missed teaching, especially teaching Black children, so that's the main reason why I came to this school amidst the other offers" (I1,25-27/1.22.07).

Amber recognizes that her mother was her first teacher; however, she assumes a different role in educating her students. She neither relies on parents nor memories of her educational experiences in order to teach her children. Instead, she makes a concerted effort to inform parents of their child's progress and understands that she may be the only person in her students' lives who will take the time to meet their specific learning needs:

Because...like my mother taught me to read. I knew how to read when I got to school. So a lot of times with kids it's hard to – with struggling readers, sometimes it's hard to find that trick that really works for them because...I remember being in this workshop and the facilitator was

saying, “You do what the teachers did for you.” But I didn’t learn how to read at school, and a lot of things my mother did, I can’t do with 21 kids. So I don’t have that, that memory I guess or experience to pull from to help me with my own teaching. (I2,49-55/7.02.2007)

I think I’m more of a hands-on teacher...I try to involve my students and their parents as well as all school – basically all aspects of school in their learning. I really try to focus on all of the child more than just their academics. (I1,4-7/1.22.207)

But my mother, one thing she told me later on, when I became an adult – she never looked to the school to give us what we needed to know, she never expected that from them, so we always had what we needed at home, so a lot of times as a teacher it’s hard to know what they [students] exactly need and how to give it to them because I didn’t get everything I needed from my teachers. And I think I got it more so from home. (I2,69-76/7.02.2007)

Amber feels most comfortable teaching low-achieving students although she was a good student and she believes that building relationships and establishing trust are essential to their instruction:

...that’s why I do a lot to get to know my students, especially knowing them academically...they [her colleagues] would always talk about how I pay close attention to that [skills], but that’s how I get to know them – that’s how I found out what exactly it is that they need and I really try to go through and find specific strategies to target them and I really try to look at...my marker is always December. If I don’t see growth by December, then I really have to do something concentrated for that student. Either looking at me, looking at them, finding where the weakness is because if there’s no growth, there cannot be any progress. (I2,86-95/7.02.2007)

Relating to her students is not problematic although Amber was reared very differently from her students. She attributes her ability to relate to her students to common interests that they share “I listen to a lot of the same music they listen to...can speak in a language they can understand, and...I know how to get their attention basically” (I2,27-29/7.2.07). Amber’s dedication to her students’ futures drives her classroom instruction. Her lessons are very structured and students are accountable for one another. You may find students

in small groups completing assignments together, reading independently, or conferencing with her (CO/4.9.07). She remains after school every day during the week (unless a faculty meeting has been scheduled) in order to tutor those students who need additional instruction outside of the school day. In order to ensure that she remains abreast of the latest trends and scientifically based research, Amber seeks assistance from research journals, her colleagues, and assistant principal. She admits that she has become more comfortable asking questions about “things that I don’t know, that I don’t understand” (I1,65-66/1.29.07). Those temporary moments of confusion dissipate when Amber is active in:

...seeing the light bulb come on. Seeing that child who was completely lost, and you’re just showing it to them and it’s like, “Ah, that’s how you do it!” That to me is the best feeling in the world, and I just, I don’t know and that’s why I always liked teaching ...lower leveled children. In most of my academic experiences I’ve always had the lower level readers – most of your EIP [Early Intervention Program] students were mainly my students, but I love those students because they’re challenging but also when you see the light come on, it’s like “Yes, that’s what I’m trying to get you to see, now you see it!” so I enjoy that. (I1,167-174/1.22.07)

Amber understands that *No Child Left Behind* has the most impact on her students because of the law’s threat of retention if they do not meet the standards on the state-mandated criterion-referenced test administered in the spring of each academic year. Amber uses the ramifications of *No Child Left Behind* to encourage her students and parents to view education seriously and her commitment and positive relationships with them have proven to be very effective; however, the expectations of the law are also disconcerting:

...it’s almost like at this point being set up for failure because there’s certain goals that you know your district or your school’s expected to achieve, but they just can’t, I mean like when is it, by 2013, I think every child will be able to read? And if they can’t, what? I mean, that’s not a

realistic goal and it's like if you put something in place and then mainly you put pressure on schools to make it, ...you're not really investing in schools, you mainly just put pressure on schools to make it happen and...that to me is very frustrating because it's not anything that I can see...you don't feel motivated to work toward it because you know that it just won't happen. I mean, it just won't. (I1,179-187/2.22.07)

Amber hoped that the teacher study group would provide her with opportunities to learn from her colleagues and “see how other teachers deal with some of the same issues I have, but different approaches” (I1,140-141/2.22.07).

Profile of Kim

Kim is a 37-year-old married mother of three who entered the field of education 14 years ago. Born in the capital city of the state in which this study was conducted, she received her undergraduate and Master of Arts degree from a university located in the same state. When seeking an educational leadership program, Kim found an institution that simultaneously offered the Educational Specialist degree and the leadership endorsement. At the time of the study, Kim was enrolled in her specialist's program and traveled to another state to attend classes on certain weekends during each month. During her 14-year career, Kim has touched the lives of students in every grade level from kindergarten through fifth grade. Daily, you will find her around the school after hours due to her involvement as the co-chairperson of Grant's after-school tutorial, sponsor of a civic club, serving on the leadership committee, and supporting new teachers. Maintaining a membership in a teacher organization also keeps Kim abreast of guidelines and improvements in the field of education. Kim was very involved in group conversations and would audaciously ask questions concerning the irony of school policy and the recommendations made by Ladson-Billings for implementing culturally-relevant pedagogy.

Kim is the younger of two daughters born to parents who gave education top priority in their household. Although Kim's parents were not reared middle class, they worked and established better living conditions for their children and insisted that their daughters understood that learning was non-negotiable:

...it was instilled in us it doesn't matter how much money you have, what you have on your body. Two things are for sure: you're going to go to school *and behave* [laughs] and you are going to do what you need to do as far as your education. ...and that was just a given in our house. It was education and nothing else, you know, they didn't have time for playing and foolishness or whatever – those were the extra things. And they were serious about that. (I2,80-85/6.27.07)

Kim's understanding of the importance of her education was delayed until the sixth grade. Before that time, Kim used the shadow cast by her sister's academic aptitude to hide and underestimate her individual potential:

...growing up, she [her older sister] was the studious one, and I was the more carefree, laidback one. ...she made all As and Bs and I did what I had to do to get by. ...but my parents were still on us as far as our education. If there was something that we were having problems with they always sought out help to help us with it – mainly me. (I2,4-8/6.27.07)

In the sixth grade, Kim met a teacher named Mrs. McMichael whose astute observation of her apathetic student caused her to take swift action in order to prevent Kim from “falling through the cracks”:

...she came to me...actually she was a minister's wife and...she came to me and basically said, “I know you, and I know what you can do, and you need to stop playing games.” And I was like, “Al-righty then.” She was like you're going to do A, B, C, and D and she called my parents – she told my parents that I was staying after school with her, we were going to work on this, and if I had to go to her house on the weekend or do whatever...she said oh yeah I'm [Kim] going to step up to the plate and she pushed me and she, yes [a surprised look was on my face] and she forced me to do, you know, what I was able to do and I never had anybody to try to pull that out of me, you know... (I2,22-30/6.27.07)

This encounter between the teacher and the future educator would transform Kim's life and eventually influenced her decision to become a teacher. As a student, Kim abhorred reading and any topic associated with reading. She had a tendency to shy away from reading books outside of class requirements; however, Mrs. McMichael introduced her to various genres of literature. When asked if she liked reading, Kim vehemently replied,

NO, ooh God, no. No I didn't. I hated it [laughs] I just...I hated it. Again, I did enough to get by. ...and once I got into 6th grade and Mrs. McMichael, you know, started working with me then I – she kinda introduced me to you know, different books. It wasn't about reading textbooks and you know, the little basal readers... But she got me into reading other books, magazines, and you know the little chapter books about little girls and stuff... (I2,104-109/6.27.07)

Upon graduation from high school, Kim came to a crossroad concerning her future. At the insistence of her mother, she enrolled in a technical school because she was not interested in attending college. Kim had her sights on becoming the proprietor of a daycare "I've always wanted to own my own daycare, but I never associated owning my own daycare with actually, physically teaching – becoming a teacher" (I1,25-26/1.21.07). After careful negotiations with her mother, Kim attempted to enroll in a computer programming class which was closed. As she looked at available courses, she noticed that a paraprofessional training certification class was open. She believed that information from this course would be beneficial when she opened her business. She completed the entire program to become a certified paraprofessional and secured a job in a public school system. Once Kim began to interact with the children she realized that she had found her niche and returned to school and earned her bachelor's and master's degrees. Kim's parents' childhood stories remains a constant reminder that a crusade for her students' education is necessary "I take their [her parents'] experiences and the things that they

shared with us [Kim and her sister]...how hard it was and how my mom said that she only had one pair of shoes and...they had holes...” (I2,61-63/6.27.07). Some of her students will be able to tell that same story; however, Kim hopes that in the recesses of their mind they will remember that at least one teacher emphasized all that they possessed instead of focusing on what they did not have:

My sister had a teacher and I had the same teacher, and one day she made the comment to me that I am *nothing* like my sister. ...that kinda crushed me because I knew my sister was the smart one, she was the quiet one, and you know, so that kinda like dropped my little self-esteem a little bit, but I guess from that point forth I decided I’m gonna become a teacher, and I’m going to help kids like me, you know, who have the potential but feel laid back and really not, you know, don’t really have someone to like really stay on them. ...and then the ones who have problems not downing them and mak[ing] them feel bad about the things they can’t do. (I2,10-18/6.27.07)

She describes herself as “...compassionate, I think that I look at each one of my children and their differences and I try to teach towards those differences” (I1,3-4/1.21.07). This depiction is accurate to any observer who enters into her classroom. Extensively trained on standards-based education, Kim’s students are actively engaged in centers that involve constant interaction with text and other concrete materials (CO/3.2.07) that are tailored to the students’ specific needs. Kim’s joy as a teacher comes at the end of the school year when she notices the improvements of her students during the year:

I guess for me since I teach first grade...seeing how when they come in, they only know their beginning sounds and a couple of words and then towards the end of the year when they go to second grade they’re able to read and actually comprehend and write and that’s satisfaction for me. (I1,175-178/1.21.07)

Many factors are a source of irritation for Kim, but she named the number of low-performing students in her class and the lack of parental involvement as two that were most pervasive:

...having so many children coming to me who are low [performing]. And I guess it puzzles me why is it that if they start to come to school earlier now, like in PreK and kindergarten and how when they get to me they still don't know their letter sounds or identify letters or write letters when they had two years of that practice, so that kind of frustrates me a little bit. And when they come to me and they are soooo low. ...the lack of parental involvement and not so much as parents coming in, but even helping them at home with homework. ...a lot of parents think that kindergarten and first grade is just, you know, play. They don't know that this is setting the tone, you know, that homework is setting their study habits – setting the tone for their study habits, and the type of behaviors or activities completed as classwork – they say, “Aw, you just play anyway” but it's still work, you know that it's still setting the tone for third and fourth grade. (I1,185-196/1.21.07)

Kim admitted that my insistence encouraged her to join the group, but two other factors contributed to her participation “I guess I'm interested in the research that's out there for our children and to hear what my colleagues are saying about the things they're doing in their classroom that's helping them, you know, to teach our kids” (I1,142-144/1.21.07).

Profile of Elle

Elle is a 33-year-old third-grade teacher with eight years of teaching experience in the same grade. Born in rural Georgia, she matriculated to a large university within the state after completing high school. She was awarded the Master of Education and Specialist in Education degrees from another state-sponsored institution. At the time of the study, Elle was enrolled in a leadership doctoral program. The administrators of Grant Elementary School recognize and value her leadership qualities as well. She serves as the co-chairperson of our staff morale committee (sunshine), school-wide leadership team, and is a member of the honors day committee. She is also affiliated with a national teacher organization and is an active and dedicated member of her historically Black sorority. Elle had committed to another school-based initiative prior to the implementation of the study which caused her to miss four of the meetings (see Appendix

F), but she would always stop by my office to ask me what was discussed. During the teacher study group, Elle was observed absorbing the information and soliciting the opinions of her colleagues for guidance that would encourage positive interactions with students, parents, and other teachers.

Elle and her younger sister were born to parents who have been married for 38 years, and without hesitation she cited her family as the most influential people in her life:

They're my biggest supporters, caregivers, just everything. ...my mom and dad, they're still married (I2,4-5/8.1.07). ...whenever I need them, they're there for me no matter what. My career change they supported, ...me going back to school, they supported, when I call crying because I'm not doing what I need to be doing, they're supporting me, so...I don't know. They're my lifeline. (I2,19-22/8.1.07)

The support that Elle received from her parents was due to her mother's career as an educator and her father's active participation in completing homework and other assignments and projects. She admits that once she and her sister reached a certain point in high school, her father ensured that their homework had been completed even if he may not have understood the assignment (I2,49-53/8.01.07). In Elle's opinion, her father placed greater emphasis on learning than her mother:

I think in some aspects he really pushed education more so than my mom to be honest with you 'cause he didn't go to college. He went to like a trade school or whatever. But he was like you know education is everything, education is everything.... (I2,57-59/8.1.07)

Elle's parents did not depend on kindergarten to lay a foundation for literacy; conversely, her mother provided her with the first memories of her academic experiences with reading:

My mama taught me how to read, and she taught me sight words. They were everywhere around the house. I had flash cards, and also and I'll

never forget and I still have these books – Dick, Jane, and Spot. Those are the books I learned how to read from and those of the titles that I can remember, and then there were the ones that were the level up from them and so on, but those were my very first books. (I2,77-81/8.1.07)

Parental involvement is very important to Elle because of the vivid mental images of her parents making sure that she was prepared for school:

I think that's why I keep bringing up the home and that parent factor is important because I think it really makes a difference. ...But I think home is a *major* factor for the majority [of students] who really need that. (I2,86-93/8.1.07)

The profound affect of parent support has influenced her teaching and the interactions that she has with her students' parents.

Elle began her career in education at Grant Elementary School as a student teacher. Once she graduated, she approached the former principal "...and told him that I wanted a job (if he had a position available) and he said he did, and I've been in third grade every since" (I1,101-102/1.18.07). She always wanted to be a teacher, but changed her mind after witnessing a series of negative experiences involving her mother and the profession:

...my mom was a teacher. She taught for 33 years and she was the only Black teacher at her school for years, and she had a lot of problems with the administration...she became sickly because of all the stress she was under, and I said, "I don't want to do this because my mom is so sickly." (I1,73-77/1.18.07)

Believing that her purpose in life was to become an educator, Elle was drawn to her true profession because her love of children after a stint in the corporate world. She describes herself as a teacher who "go[es] for the meat and potatoes" (I1,4-5/1.18.07). Skill acquisition is important to this teacher who believes that students' preparation for subsequent grades is contingent upon mastery of subject matter in previous grades. She

ensures that her students receive her best by utilizing the experiences and strengths of her co-workers “there’s a wealth of knowledge at Grant Elementary and I have tried to take advantage of it” (I1,148-149/1.18.07). Her collaboration with others and her inquisitive nature have contributed to her positive self-efficacy concerning teaching her present teaching assignment “I teach the subject matter and as far as third grade is concerned, I feel that I am knowledgeable about it” (I1,6-7/1.18.07). Elle’s middle class upbringing does not prohibit her from relating to her students who are financially similar to her but differ in “the mentality that’s coming from the household” (I2,31-32/8.1.07). She complements her instruction by showing compassion for her pupils through listening to their various concerns just as her parents modeled for her as a young lady:

I think I try to draw upon you know, what my parents instilled upon me and I take it in the classroom. It’s not all about me teaching EVERY minute of the day, but sitting down and listening to them saying, “You can come to me, you can talk to me.” ..It’s not always what I say goes. I don’t try to take that mentality with them, but I want to hear them, although yes I am ultimately the decision-maker, but one thing I can always say is that my dad would listen to me – he wouldn’t just shut me up and say, “You can’t express yourself.” So I try to let them express themselves, and there’s a way to go about doing that too when given the opportunity so I mean, I think I draw a lot from how I was raised when I’m in the classroom. (I2,36-44/8.1.07)

Infusing conversations with instruction is important to Elle, but she realizes that her effectiveness is measured by test scores. She admits that she has been happy with her students’ test scores, but testing data is not the standard by which she measures her teaching. Her satisfaction comes when she hears that a student reported to her mother:

“Ms. Elle taught me the most math”...So when I hear things like that, long after the child has gone, I feel like I’ve done something or when I have parents whose younger kids come through and they want me, whether they have me or not and they still come back and they tell me, “My child learned a lot from you and she [the student] remembers you did this in class or she remembered you did that in class.” Things like that lets me

know that I had, if not but an ounce of impact on the parent and the child, I must have been doing something right. (I1,322-329/1.18.07)

On the other hand, she blames her inability to reach children and lack of student motivation as causes of her dissatisfaction with teaching:

When I feel like I'm teaching and I'm not getting through to my kids. ...I see the blank look on their face, there are no light bulbs coming on, and when the kids come to me and they have no desire – no intrinsic anything and I have to have that desire for myself to teach and for them to learn. (I1,330-336,1.18.07)

Elle will go to any length in order to get her students excited about learning. She integrates games, singing, clapping, and other kinesthetic tactics in order to make learning fun (CO/2.22.07). Elle joined the study group at my request, but “the interest was there. I really didn't know what we were gonna be doing, but I wanted to find out more about what it was going to be about” (I1,269-270/1.1.8.07).

Profile of Tasha

Tasha was selected as the hostess of the teacher study group sessions because she had the largest classroom. Tasha's eleven years in education has been spent educating students in pre-kindergarten, second, third, and fourth grades in both her rural hometown in Georgia and at Grant Elementary School. After completing high school, Tasha completed one year at a community college and enrolled in cosmetology school. She used her earnings from styling hair at her own salon to finance her undergraduate degree, and after six years as a cosmetologist she closed the salon in order to return to graduate school. She earned a Master of Arts and Specialist in Education degree from two different HBCUs in Georgia. At the time of the study, Tasha and Elle were enrolled in the same Doctor of Education program. Tasha finds time in her busy schedule to sponsor student council, the Grant Elementary dance company, and is a teacher support specialist.

In addition, she is a member of a local teacher organization, historically Black sorority, and assists new members at her church. Tasha was the member of the group who was very adamant about addressing the needs of the African-American male (RJ/4.25.07), and she would reiterate the need for culturally relevant pedagogy because she was the only member of the group whose classroom was comprised of African-American and Latino students. The comedienne of the group, Tasha would always share humorous stories about race relations based on events that occurred in her classroom (FN/5.25.07).

Tasha is the oldest of four daughters born to her parents, but she has two other sisters who are very important to this close-knit family who values education:

...all of my sisters have graduated from college except the last one, she's now at [HBCU in Georgia], and my sisters and I – we are very close. My family is very close. We meet once a month to do something – go out of town...we always do something. Only two of my sisters are married, everyone [pause] three of my sisters are in education. Two of them are counselors and one is a graduation coach for a high school in [named a city outside of the metropolitan area] so we all influenced each other, I mean we – our successes, we are just very close. There's nothing we don't do that everyone doesn't get involved in. So we're very close. (I2,17-24/7.25.07)

Tasha's parents had one requirement of their daughters – each of them must complete high school, “They didn't push going to college or anything. ...the only thing my parents said to us about education was, ‘You have to go to school, you have to get good grades, and you have to finish without being pregnant’” (I2, 73-74,67-69/7.25.07). The goal of finishing high school without becoming a teenaged mother was a great accomplishment in Tasha's small, rural birthplace and her parent's goals for their daughters was justified considering the high rates of teenage pregnancy in this area. Tasha credits her parents' guidelines for school attendance and behavior with her success in school:

...we weren't troublemakers so they never had to go to the schools – we knew if we got in trouble at school, then you get in trouble at home I mean, so we never had that problem. They were very big on attending school every day – I had perfect attendance from kindergarten to twelfth grade when I graduated high school. You had to go, they didn't care what you did...when you went there [school], they never checked on us, they didn't write notes like parents do now, they didn't do that. (I2,80-86/7.25.07)

Neither of Tasha's parents graduated from college "...my mom *went* to college, but she stopped going. My dad only has a high school education" (I2,30-31/7.25.07). Tasha and her sisters were urged to continue their education past high school by a community who high expectations of them:

We were always self-motivated, I think too because we were all girls and we – everyone around us (we live in a small town) always put us on a higher pedestal than we really were, so they were our biggest influences, everyone else. They were our motivators basically because they expected us [last name] girls to do, so we would do even more, so they always expected it so I guess we just rose to the occasion because we never had any examples by anyone. (I2,74-79/7.25.07)

Tasha's memories of reading as a student involved ability grouping. She elaborated on the system of educational stratification promoted by the school system:

In first grade, you would take by their test scores, like ITBS or CRCT – the students are ranked from the lowest to the top – they would take the first 20 students and that would be your top group, the next 20 students would be next to the top, then you have a middle, next to the bottom, and the bottom group. That's the way it's been forever, and I always remember that I-I was always in the middle group – the children know, I mean they never called us like the C group – A, B, C, but I always knew I was in the middle. I don't know how I knew that, and I always knew my friend was in the highest group 'cause she had all the White kids in her class, so we always knew that. (I2,124-132/7.25.07)

She admitted that she liked reading as a young student, but spelling posed a challenge for her. This weakness affected her grades, but overall reading was not problematic because "I read a lot because my parents took us to the library and we were always in the summer

reading program – we had to read so many books during the summer...” (I2,141-143/7.25.07). Tasha chuckled when I asked her if spelling was important to her as a teacher, and after a few moments of silence, she realized that she probably paid more attention to this component of the language arts program because of her personal struggles as a student.

Tasha took a few detours on her road to teaching. She enrolled in a junior college in order to become an accountant, but she changed her mind because she found that the math was too intense and difficult (I1,44-45/1.26.07). A poster on the wall of the school led her to education:

...it [the poster] said you can become a teacher, you don't have to leave home, and that was for me because I had a boyfriend, I didn't want to leave home, so [laughs] I said, “You know what? I do like being around children, so I'll try that and see how the education classes go.” And I went to one class where you had to go and observe the elementary school that's in my home town (which we only had one elementary, one primary, one elementary, one middle, one high) and when I observed, I was like I fell in love the first day. I wanted to do it. It just worked out for me. (I147-53/1.26.07)

Sensing that her parents may have been sacrificing too much to finance her education (in her opinion), Tasha left college to attend cosmetology school, graduated in 13 months, and became an entrepreneur:

I had a salon for six years in my hometown. I worked in [town], GA for a little while...my hair stylist, she allowed me to come in her shop and work on commission when I first got out of cosmetology school so I did that and was at college at the same time. But then, I was making so much money doing hair I didn't go back to college, I stopped 'cause I was making money. And I was like, “You know what? I really need to go ahead and finish [laughs] because I started this,” I didn't want my sisters to know – I've always, I've never been like a quitter. If I start something I finish it. And I didn't want them to see that I didn't finish because I had other sisters coming up, I wanted to finish for them, so I went back to college. And then when I started teaching in '96,...I still did hair – I would do hair every now and then, like in the afternoons at my salon, but in 2000 I

stopped doing hair. I closed my shop in 2000 because I was tired – I wanted to go back to get a master’s degree and I couldn’t do all that – it was just too much. (I2,196-208/7.25.07)

As the eldest child, Tasha bore the responsibility of setting an example for her siblings.

She also realized that she had to set a precedent in her family “I was the first one to graduate college in my family – period. And I mean, all of my cousins, aunts, uncles, *everyone*” (I2,54-55/7.25.07).

The financial independence that Tasha acquired through her proprietorship did not extinguish her desire to and love of working with children and she concentrated all of her time and energy on education. One day Tasha decided that she needed to make some changes in her life. She had outgrown her small town, and moved in search for a different lifestyle in an urban area. She attended several district job fairs in the area, and when she attended our school district’s fair she recalled that she was excited at the number of African-Americans teachers and leaders present:

...I came from a community where there were only three Blacks in my school – three Black teachers, the rest were Caucasian...and I never had a problem with it, but I was just excited to work around all African-Americans ‘cause I never experienced that before in education. Now, in corporate America, I did, but not in education. (I1,60-64a/1.26.07)

Her decision to work at Grant Elementary School was made at the same job fair

So, I walked around the job fair and I had five job offers, and when I got to Grant Elementary’s table, there were three women there and by just talking to them, I had no idea where the school was located or anything about it...I wanted to work there because of the people that were at the table. (I1,64-67/1.26.07)

Tasha moved to the metropolitan area armored with a will to work with African-American students, teachers, and parents. She feels that she is able to relate from students who are dissimilar from her as a child because her students’ families mirror that of her

extended family. Tasha's parents, understanding that they were able to help their kin, broadened their resources in order to share clothing, food, etc. with family members who were not able to obtain the basic necessities on their own:

...I have – a lot of my family that were just welfare and that's all I knew because that was all I was around all the time, and we used to have to help them a lot um, even like with schoolwork and things like that – that's all we had to do 'cause my mom would always help them if not, buying food for them, providing for them, we had to give them our clothing.... (I2,67-61/7.25.07).

Tasha kept snacks, beverages and other supplies in her classroom for students. During my observation, she discovered that one of her students did not eat breakfast and reminded him that he “should never sit in this classroom hungry” (CO/5.2.07).

Tasha's busy schedule allows limited time for her to read books other than those required for her graduate program, but she communicates with other teachers to “sharpen her saw” and get new ideas for her students:

Well, I always talk to other teachers from other districts because I'm in grad school – graduate school also, so I always talk to them to see what they're doing in their classroom, what are their districts doing...but I would always network, talk to people, search the internet, things like that. I'm always searching – I don't read a lot of books because I don't have time, but I will pick up something that someone tells me this particular book is what you need. (I1,112-119/1.26.07)

Seeking assistance from various resources does not always prepare Tasha for the negative aspects of teaching that are more societal than instructional:

Parents – my biggest problem is not the children [laughs]. My biggest problem is parents because even if you have children that can't do, supportive parents will help you, but my biggest problem is parents that do not provide for children what they necessarily need for school. Like if you don't have food and you're hungry, it's hard for you to concentrate – especially if you are already behind. It's really hard when you don't know where you're going to sleep at night, that's another problem. When you don't know where your parents are, that's another problem, so having the children have what they need – I just need for them to come to school,

for them to not be hungry, for them to have clothing, and for them not to be cold. If I can have those things, I could work with the child. (I1,268-277/1.26.07)

On the other hand, she is reminded of the success of teaching when her “challenging” students demonstrate understanding of skills and concepts that she has taught:

...the more challenging children, that don’t have anyone at home, those are the ones I really like working with and the joy is when they do finally get something...like the light bulb comes on, that’s my joy, and you know, just providing for them because it’s much more than teaching...our jobs are much more than just teaching. I mean, you have to provide clothing sometimes, food because they’re hungry, I mean, you have to be a counselor, and you have to be a counselor to the parents because sometimes they come in – they’re having issues you know, so but my joy is working with those challenging ones [students] and when you overcome that. (I1,257-264/1.26.07)

Viewed as an excellent teacher by her colleagues, Tasha admitted that she needed the study group to validate her teaching methodologies:

Because I just need some help, you know? This day and time...I need help. I mean I need to know that there are teachers out there that are having some of the same issues and they may have chosen a different route than I chose, but basically, you go ask a teacher – you go in your classroom, and you’re told, “Use the standards” because of *No Child Left Behind* your test scores should be here, they should be there, but when someone goes in their classroom and they can close the door and do whatever they whatever they want to do. I need to know that I’m doing basically the right thing. Am I making the right choices? Because no one knows but me and my students what I’m *really*, really doing, so it would be nice to have some other input on some other teachers. (I1,214-223/1.26.07)

Her admission proved that teachers who are perceived as the best in the school building question their effectiveness in the classroom.

Profile of Mandy

Mandy is a 37-year-old mother who has been an educator for ten years. Born in the Midwest, she attended graduated from a university in a different Midwestern state.

She has also obtained the Master of Education degree and was enrolled in a Doctor of Education program in Georgia. The majority of Mandy's teaching experience has been with sixth graders in the middle school setting, but she has taught third and fourth grades as well. The 2006-2007 school year was Mandy's first time teaching in Georgia, and she had to balance learning a new state curriculum, adjust to being away from home, and working in third grade (a grade which has been targeted for promotion and placement in Georgia). She chose to accept a position at Grant Elementary School because "I got hired here [laughs] ...and I really like this school. I really enjoyed talking to the principal and I felt like this would be somewhere where I would love to work" (I1,21-23/2.23.07).

Although she was a first-year teacher at Grant Elementary School, her talents were put to work as a sponsor for our safety patrols and a member of the honors day committee. She has not joined any community or social organizations in Georgia, but she transferred her membership in a teacher organization (she was very active in her home state) to her current assignment. Mandy was very quiet during the sessions as she listened to her colleagues. She claimed that she was not shy (FN/4.16.07), but everyone else had such good ideas. Mandy was the participant that I had to make a conscious effort to remember was present (she usually sat behind the other participants until I asked her to move) (RJ/4.17.07), and she responded most times because someone asked her a direct question which forced her to speak.

Mandy hails from a family that consisted of her, a younger sister (who died when Mandy was 21 years old), and two step-brothers. In adulthood, Mandy discovered that she had a paternal sister and five brothers; however, she considers all of them to be her siblings. Mandy's childhood was not easy, and she refers to her early years as

“negative...it wasn’t all happy days for me when I was growing up” (I2,6,7-8/6.19.07).

She was able to escape her harsh reality by immersing herself in literature:

I have always read. I LOVE to read, and that might have been my escape like I would go to the library at school and I’d go home and I would read an entire book in one night. Like I used to like to read like Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys,... Judy Blume books. I would read one book in a night. You know, or read until it was time to go to bed. So I LOVE to read, love to read, and of course everything you do is reading. (I2,85-87,92-94/6.19.07)

Mandy’s mother was the overseer of her education, but she was not as active in her learning as Mandy is with her own daughter:

...my [step]dad was very quiet, my mother she never really encouraged me to do anything, ...I mean she made me go to school (don’t get me wrong) but as far as helping me with homework and stuff like that...she never placed emphasis on anything. (I2,34-37/6.19.07)

She admits that learning was not a priority for her and the love of an aunt is the reason why she made any attempt to attend college:

Actually, my drive didn’t come until college. ...when I moved out and I moved in with an aunt in [the west coast]. And she’s the one who encouraged me to go to college. My mind wasn’t on school because I barely made it out of high school. ...actually I had quit high school and I went back and so my thing was just survival. When I went to California my aunt she was like, “Mandy you need to go to school and you know you need to do this and this and this.” ...so I started college, but I wasn’t serious – I was just going because my aunt was making me go, you know, pushing me to go and so probably two years I played around in school, you know, just going and not really knowing what I wanted to do just taking different classes, but eventually I got tired of working at [a national shoe chain]. ...after we moved to [Midwestern state], that’s when I really started college and even then the first maybe couple semesters I still wasn’t serious, but then I got serious and you know, I went ahead on and finished. (I2,53-67/6.19.07)

Despite her mother’s participation in her education as a young lady, Mandy had family members who were educators. These persons encouraged her to become a teacher as well upon her return to the Midwest from the west coast:

...on my mother's side...everyone that has been to college is a teacher, so it's about like seven, eight of us who are teachers. So, when I went to [named Midwestern state], that's where most of them live, they were like "Start teaching, start teaching, you know 'cause this business degree you may or may not get in, you know, education, every place is looking for a teacher." So I said, "Okay, I'll try it." (I2,140-144/6.19.07)

Mandy became a teacher at the insistence of her family and because she "love[s] working with the kids" (I1,16/2.23.07). She considers herself "to be a strict teacher"

(I1,10/2.23.07) because her personal experiences have convinced her that students need teachers who understand that they [students] have very limited choices as adults without an education:

...I realize that education was my way out. ...I want kids that maybe come from a similar background as mine to go to school, to do their best no matter what someone else is telling them that you can't do something or that you, you are going to grow up to be nothing or you may have a bad situation at home – education is the key. (I2,77-80/6.19.07)

She plays games and uses learning centers in order to help her students perceive learning as fun (CO/3.01.07). Her love of reading impacts her instruction in all of the core subjects and she tries to incorporate text-to-world experiences in her lessons in order for the students to view reading as a life skill instead of merely an activity that they complete in school. Convincing the students to read is challenging for Mandy at times, but she is persistent:

I encourage my kids to read. It's difficult because they're like, "Uh uh I don't want to," but I try to show them that everything you do is reading. Like when you go in [store] or you going down the highway, I mean you got to know where you're going, you got to know...how to read because if you can't, you're going to be looking at someone else to help you....and reading is just so very important, and that's why I try to instill in my kids...and a lot of them come from a background where they are not encouraged to read and some of them haven't, you know, like had books placed in front of them, and I tell them, "Pick up something that you like and read it, you know, just start off with that" and that's how I try to encourage them. (I2,109-117/6.19.07)

Two other factors that have the potential to impede Mandy's teaching are a lack of parental and learned helplessness:

When students, not only the students but the parents, they don't get involved and they don't...it's like they don't try, it's like they just don't care and it's all up to me when it's not all up to me. I need for them to get involved because they need to help their child. (I1,159-162/2.23.07)

A lot of them come to school and they have never been motivated to learn. They've never been pushed, and sometimes that's frustrating because we're like "Come on, come on, you can do this! You can do it!" and they're just looking at you like, 'No I can't,' and it's frustrating! (I1,91-93/2.23.07)

She counteracts negative forces by relishing in her students' success:

When a student gets it and they say Ms. [Mandy], "I've got it!" I'm like "Yes!" Especially a student that started off real slow and then they get it... And one [a student] who really tries and I mentioned before about a student that's not motivated and all of a sudden, they get motivated and that makes me happy. (I1,152-155/2.23.07)

Mandy's co-workers were instrumental in helping her during her first year of teaching in Georgia, and she also solicits the help of other students in her graduate school program.

She joined the study group hoping that this form of professional learning would aid her in her professional growth and to "get ideas from other teachers, and I like to be involved" (I1,105/2.23.07).

Profile of Cheryl

Cheryl is a 36-year-old fourth-grade teacher with nine years of teaching experience. She moved to Georgia from another southeastern state in order to attend college at an HBCU. She earned a Master of Education and at the time of the study, she was completing requirements for completing her Specialist in Education. During her tenure in education, she has taught third and fifth grades in addition to her current

assignment. She serves the school community by participating on the field day committee and serving as a sponsor for the science club and the step team. She belongs to a teacher organization and states that her personal goal is to “grow in the profession that I have chosen and to continue to learn what I need in order to better serve students”

(PJ/2.26.07). Cheryl was a vocal member of the group whose passion for teaching and learning encouraged other members of the group to “let loose,” and speak freely because “we’re all Black up in this piece [room]” (TSG#3/3.5.07).

Cheryl is the youngest of five children who grew up “poor” (I2,27/8.22.07). Her three older brothers and sister depended on one another for survival because her mother worked long hours in order to support the family. Cheryl named her oldest brother and sister (who is now deceased) as the most influential people on her life when she was younger, but as she grew up, she and the second youngest sibling influenced one another (I2,16-17/8.22.07). Cheryl is the youngest, but was “*the* first and only child to go to school, go to college, and I actually influenced my, I call him the knee baby, my brother who is next to me— he’s actually going to school now” (I2,4-6/8.22.07).

Although Cheryl’s mother was a single parent, her expectations for school were ingrained in her children:

...my mom was a single mom and basically, my mother was an “I’m gone tell you once” type of person. My mother worked a lot, so I really didn’t see my mom a lot, but she set – rooted in me that education is important. You go to school. To be honest, my mom never had to go to a parent conference. I was a good kid. I mean, I was one of those kids that I knew to go to school, get my lesson, stay to myself...when my mom came home, homework was on the table...then it was back in my bookbag and then the next morning I [would] go to school and I do what I had to do. So I would *think* that she instilled in me how important it [education] was. (I2,65-73/8.22.07)

Cheryl possessed the knowledge that her mother was concerned about her education even though she was unable to be actively involved at the school. Cheryl was not only an avid reader as a child, but she was also a talented writer. Her mother recognized Cheryl's gift and provided her with encouragement:

...I was a good student. I used to love to read and I would – actually when I was younger, I used to write stories. I used to make up stories, very creative mind, a little wild, and I used to put them on – cut the little papers and write little different stories. My mother was very religious, I liked to write little songs and my mom would sing 'em and you know, make me feel good. So I was like, “Wow! that was good.” (I2,91-96/8.22.07)

Cheryl honed her teaching skills as a child on her many nieces and nephews and her interactions with them provided her with enough evidence to enter the teaching profession:

As a young person I had *a lot*, a gang of nieces and nephews and I always played school with them, and it was just something that I felt. When they wouldn't get the right answer, I got to pop them with them ruler and things of that nature, so I just knew that it was my calling because I helped them get through school you know, helped them with their ABCs and 123s. (I1,19-23/1.29.07)

Education was Cheryl's first choice of a career, but began to waver between teaching and becoming a pediatrician. Both fields would allow her to work with children, “but teaching you know, allowed me to work with children and do more with children so, it was second then it flipped to my first” (I2,120-121/8.22.07). Cheryl joined the staff at Grant Elementary School because “Grant was the first school that called me” (I1,27/1.29.07).

Cheryl incorporates writing into her instruction because she remembered that she utilized this vehicle for expressing herself as a child. She also relates the reading curriculum to events and experiences that the children understand:

...what I do is I like to make sure it's life experiences and related to something in life. [I] build on them [interests] and make them [students] want to read or get to understanding literacy or what they are getting ready to learn by making it tie in to a real-life situation. (I1,12-15/1.29.07)

Cheryl's childhood allows her to form positive relationships with all of her students, but she ensures that the students who have low socioeconomic status have the materials that they need for school:

I can relate to those students better in my classroom because I know where they are because I've been there. Therefore, when my students come without the belt, I need to go out and buy a belt because I know that mom probably couldn't afford a belt or whatever that situation is...one thing I do – I really, really do emphasize in my classroom is the fact that we don't talk about no one at all – physical appearance, anything. We don't do that because you don't know anyone's situation. Therefore, I make my students who knows his or her home life is not the best – I make them feel just like the ones who come in here with their hair combed every day you know, feeling the same 'cause we're all one. (I2,40-49/8.22.07)

Cheryl does not feel that she treats her students whose home situation differs from hers any differently, but she knows that:

...they're more likely the ones who are the ones that are gonna get it so to speak. You know, the parents are gonna make sure they have everything they need. So I don't really concern myself *too* much about what it is that they don't have. (I2,55-57/8.22.07)

A teacher who practices “tough love,” parents who feel that they should have an adversarial relationship with teachers distresses her. She tells parents who she encounters with this perception, “We’re here for the same purpose and that’s to serve your child better so we need to come together” (I1,182-183/1/29/07). She gets her greatest satisfaction from teaching by “just coming in here, seeing different kids, [and] just knowing that they need me for something. And whether it I teach them the curriculum or I teach them something about life – that’s like the biggest thing” (I1,167-170/1.29.07). Whether she is having a day that is stressful or not, Cheryl is more of a facilitator in the

class who assesses and monitors her students' progress because her they have internalized the classroom guidelines for appropriate behavior (CO/3.20.07). She joined the teacher study group because I asked her to, but she added:

The type of person I am, I'm one of those laid back [people]...just let me come in the classroom and teach. ...When you came at me, you were like, "I need you." I'm a team player. You need help? I can do it, got it. But normally, if someone would have said, "I need some people to sign up," I would have walked out the door. (I1,127-131/1.29.07)

Profile of Karen

Karen is a teacher in her late 30's who has either taught second or third grades over the eight years. The married mother of a son is from the same southeastern city as Cheryl, and they affectionately referred to each other as "homegirl" throughout the group. Karen completed her undergraduate degree in her home state, but received her Master of Science degree via an on-line program. At the time of the study, she was enrolled in an on-line Doctor of Education program. She serves the school community as a member of the mentoring and honors day committees. She is also a member of a distinguished group of African-American women in her hometown. Karen was the "amen corner" of the group. She would sit in the group quietly until someone said something that excited her, and she would encourage the speaker by actually saying, "Amen!" (RJ/5.01.07).

Karen was reared in a middle class household with her three younger siblings under the watchful eye of her father and mother. Her parents reared their children to be close. The eldest of four children, and Karen was very aware of her responsibility to her younger sisters and brother very early in her life, and she continues to view herself as a role model for them:

...anytime I would fail, being the eldest and considered the role model for the other three, if I would fail my daddy would always bring it to my

attention, “If you do this, what do you expect [named siblings] to do?” So even now until today, when it comes to going back to school and getting my degree – getting my doctoral degree, I feel like that’s something I have to do because I have to show my other siblings that you know, still I am a role model...do what you see me doing and that’s trying to be the very best person that you can. (I2,23-30/8.23.07)

Karen’s parents made education a top priority in their household and they did not negotiate with their children concerning whether or not they would attend school. Her father not only talked to his children about the benefits of obtaining an education, he provided them with physical evidence that showed why schooling was important:

...He would always come home and he would share with us about how hard it was not having a degree and how important it was for us to get our education...even as little children. My daddy did construction work and he would work out in the sun every day and he would come home and he would call all of us to the dinner table and he would show us his hands, and he would say, “Look at my hands. I never, ever want you guys to work as hard as I work. I send you to school, you’re to get a good education, and you need to go to college.” (I2,6-12/8.23.07)

As a result of her parent’s insistence, Karen excelled as a student “I was always at the top of the class, spelling bees...number one or number two...I remember my best friend, she and I – I mean we would always compete. I was very, very smart. Always an honor roll student” (I2,71-73/8.23.07).

Karen became a teacher after leaving a career in the corporate world as an insurance coordinator because she wanted to interact with children in the event that she did not birth any children of her own:

I’ve always loved children...So I just felt like if I became a teacher, I would always have a child – not only one child, but *children*. And I always wanted children to learn what I knew and even more, and I always felt like I could touch a child that someone possibly couldn’t touch. And not only that, after having my son, being able to be off with him during the summers you know, vacationing and stuff like that, that gave me an opportunity to just have time with my own child, but basically my love for children – I had a love for children. (I1,37-44/1.18.07)

The reputation of Grant Elementary School encouraged Karen to transfer from another school within the district. Karen assumes the role of the parent who cares about her students and she is strict on them because she wants them to succeed. Discipline is very important to her because she feels as if she is unable to teach students when they behave inappropriately in class:

I consider myself as an excellent teacher. I'm one, I consider myself as very caring, loving, but on the other hand, I'm very strict. I'm more or less like a parent/teacher. I enjoy teaching young children, but the main thing is, I think...[sighs] I tend to want to correct behaviors first, then find myself teaching...Overall, I just consider myself a parent/teacher. (I1,3-7,1.18.07)

Even though she views herself as an excellent teacher, Karen uses research conducted for her graduate courses, collaborating with other teachers, and reflecting on past strategies that were successful to improve her teaching. Her high self-efficacy results in high expectations of her students, and she believes with proper support from administrators, she can help her students meet their academic goals:

You may have a child that's on Level 1 [not meeting the standards], but I see that child as a Level 3 [exceeding the standards]. If given an opportunity to really work with that child, and having the support I need, I believe that I can push that child to where he needs to be. (I2,81-84/8.23.07)

Karen's joy in teaching comes when her students demonstrate that they understand what she is teaching "...and my children say, 'I've got it!' and especially when they get it on the first you know, on the first go round they get it! Just seeing little light bulbs come on...Just seeing the light bulbs come on" (I1,204-207/1.18.07). Her excitement sometimes is overshadowed by the large amounts of documentation that is required in the age of accountability:

I find myself doing just way too much paperwork, and it doesn't give me an opportunity to be the way that I want to be or the way that I see myself as a teacher. You know, there are times when I'm actually up teaching when you know, I can't teach as well as I want to because I'm thinking about what's due – what paperwork needs to be completed. While I'm up teaching, I'm literally up trying to complete paperwork you know, and it takes away...it doesn't allow me to be as strong as I can be as a teacher because it's just way too much paperwork. (I1,211-217/1.18.07)

She knew that the teacher study group would not be able to relieve the amount of paperwork that she had to complete, but she decided to participate because I “led” her to join (I1,173/1.18.07).

As Table 2 shows, the participants are not only leaders in the school, but they impact their social and professional communities through their participation in civic and teacher organizations, church auxiliaries, and sororities.

Characteristics of an African-American Teacher Study Group

A series of observations were made during the teacher study group sessions in order to identify the group's characteristics; however, some of these features may or may not have been indicative of a teacher study group comprise exclusively of African-Americans. My purpose is to describe those aspects that were evident in the group under investigation. Some facets can be obviously linked to the African-American community, but others may have been detected in groups that included other races and cultures as well. The most noticeable features of the group under investigation were a) establishing trust; b) use of call and response; c) non-verbal gesturing; d) the use of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) and slang; and e) the organization and structure.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Questionnaire Results

Participant	Age	Education	Professional Experience	Certification Field(s)	Grade Level Taught	Professional/Social Organization(s) (Yes/No)
Tina	41	BS, MA, working on Ed.S.	18 years	Early Childhood	2 nd	Yes/No
Holly	34	BA, MS, working on Ph.D.	7 years	Early Childhood	1 st	Yes/Yes
Amber	30	BS, MS, working on Ed.D.	8 years	Early Childhood Educational Leadership	3 rd	No/Yes
Kim	37	BA, M.Ed., working on Ed.S.	14 years	Early Childhood Middle Grades (Math) Teacher Support	1 st	Yes/No
Elle	33	BA, M.Ed., working on Ed.D.	8 years	Early Childhood	3 rd	Yes/Yes
Tasha	36	BA, MA, Ed.S., working on Ed.D.	11 years	Early Childhood Educational Leadership	4 th	Yes/Yes
Mandy	37	BA, M.Ed., working on Ed.D.	10 years	Early Childhood Middle Grades Educational Leadership	3 rd	Yes/No
Cheryl	36	BS, MA, working on Ed.S.	9 years	Early Childhood	4 th	Yes/No
Karen	late 30s	BS, MS, working on Ed.D.	8 years	Elementary Ed. Middle Grades (Language Arts & Social Studies)	3 rd	No/Yes

Establishing Trust

As a newly-appointed administrator at Grant Elementary School, I did not begin recruiting participants for the study until I was able to assess the culture of the school which included familiarizing myself with the faculty and become acclimated to the site. I observed those teachers who had been identified as those who had either obtained leadership certification or were enrolled in a leadership endorsement program, and intentionally initiated conversations with them and began building bonds. I had to be assured that the participants who were eligible for the study were those whom I could entrust with the final piece that would culminate my academic career. This is a sentiment that I shared with the participants as well, “I wouldn’t have invited you to participate in something that is so important to me if I didn’t trust you” (TSG #4/3.26.07). My confidence in the participants was the first barrier that the group had to overcome in order to establish our safe space.

During our first meeting the participants were told that confidentiality was imperative for the members of the study group to evolve and grow during the five months of the research period. Conversations were guarded during the first meeting, but as the participants became more comfortable with me and one another, personal and professional issues were addressed with the assurance that information was not to be shared with others outside of the group:

I can say that in the beginning everyone was kinda closed-lipped [laughs]... didn’t want to express themselves, but as the time went by and the more often we met, people felt more at ease and felt comfortable with discussing things and when we realized that it was going to stay in the group, among each other, we were more apt to get deeply involved and we did get deeply involved and went over our little study time lots of times, but I thoroughly enjoyed it and it was a good experience and I would ask that it continue for next year. (Tina/I2,206-212/6.27.07)

I think that [guidelines] is important. 'Cause then you won't have everybody in there, you know, just anybody in there. And then, I think with our study group, I think that everything we discussed stayed in there. And I think that with some of the teachers (I'm just speaking from our school)...It would have been spread around the school and it would have been taken out of context too. You know, they would have been saying other things, you know, that really wasn't really said... (Mandy/I2,319-328/6.19.07)

Each participant mentioned that they trusted the other members of the group and they felt as if their code of silence was questioned by members of the school staff who were not affiliated with the group. They remained firm in their commitment to keep confidentiality a priority. In order to assure the members that I was also abiding by this unofficial code, I also shared information that I did not want shared with others outside of the group. Trust was not an issue for the participants because members were able to be honest about their strengths and their areas for improvement without feeling that others would view them as incompetent and ineffective.

Honesty

Amber felt that each member's decision to be honest about her challenges in the classroom aided her professional growth as a teacher and learner:

...you have to be open to the idea [of seeking help from others], but everybody has to come honest. Like one thing I really enjoyed about our study group was everyone really seemed genuine. "This is really how I'm feeling, this is really how I see it, or this is really the problem that I'm having." But if you can't be open and be transparent and know that just because I'm Black doesn't mean that I know everything about Black people and Black students and I have all the...you know what I mean? I have all the answers. But you have to be transparent enough to say that or at least give that all so that other people can feed into you because if you come into it with that idea of, you know, "Well I'm not gonna say that because I don't want them to think this," then you can't really can't get a lot out of it [the group], and you have to see the bigger picture.... (Amber/I2,175-187/7/2/07)

Karen also felt that honesty was important, and as a result, the participants discovered that dilemmas that they faced were not isolated incidents – all of the teachers had common situations with students and parents:

...we were be able to be honest and talk openly with one another and also explain to them how we realize that when one situation was going on in our classroom, it wasn't just us – it was happening in someone else's classroom. (Karen/I2,106-109/8.23.07)

The effects of collaboration and sharing will be discussed as a theme in Chapter 5; however, Karen was the only person that specifically named honesty as the reason why the teachers were able to identify similar challenges that were present in each other's classrooms.

Tensions of Group

Another component of trust that evolved from the group discussion involved extending an invitation for others to join the conversation once the research period ended. The members of the group struggled and had very strong opinions about whether or not opening up the group to others would compromise the “safe space” that was established:

If we opened up the meetings to others without being a gripe session—some people don't want to expose themselves to not knowing in order to get the help they need. I feel comfortable going to Holly and asking questions, but everyone is not like that. (Kim/TSG #4/3.26.07)

We would lose some of that [trust] if we opened it up to everybody. That was the beauty of it; we all came in here, ...trusting each other, feeling like we could say what we had to say, needed to say without being judged by it. (Tina/FG,183-185/5.21.07)

The participants attributed trust to their perceived success of the group and felt that people were not afraid to voice challenges that they had inside and outside of the classroom. As a result, they were able to use one another as scaffolds in their individual learning processes. Kim noted, “The environment was relaxed, it was informative.

Everybody, to me, seemed to have an open mind and kinda listened to what everybody else was saying, and then some people even changed their opinions during the study group..." (I2,453-456/6.27.07). Elle agreed with Kim's assessment of the importance of the support of the group:

All I can say is, it [the study group] helped me...it – I was able to open up, and I felt comfortable doing it. I didn't feel like I was gonna be judged. I didn't feel like, "Oh I really need to watch what I'm sayin'. Can I say this, should I not?..." I just felt very open, very relaxed, very free, and I felt like people were actually listening to what I had to say. But not only that, but people understood and could relate to what I was going through. (Elle/I2,312-316)

The environment provided the participants with a place to air their frustrations, receive positive feedback, express their concerns in a manner that did not criticize the leaders themselves, only school policy. The professional manner in which they phrased their questions and concerns prevented the group from becoming an attack on the school itself:

...our leader [Charnita] put guidelines on who could be in the study group, and I think that should be with any study group because if we had some other people that I'm thinking of from our school, it would have been like a true gripe session, you know, it wouldn't have been...I don't think it would have been as good as it was. (Mandy/I2,302-305/6.19.07)

The participants identified aspects of the school that they would like to change, but they also proposed solutions to address some of the issues that plague our school.

Race Creating a Safe Space

The second teacher study group introduced culturally relevant pedagogy and building relationships with students. As the conversation ensued, I posed the following question to the group, "Is it an African-American thing that we have to trust you before we can believe in you?" (TSG #2/ 2.26.07). The majority of the group nodded and affirmed that trust (for Black people) is cultural and began sharing personal accounts of

school-related situations that indicated that trust is not only important for our relationships with students, but for adults as well (FN/2.26.07). The teachers felt that the African-Americans in our school community should be able to trust one another because of our shared race and this factor alone yields a different way of thinking, especially when you are talking about Black students. Holly expressed her thoughts on this topic during the focus group interview, “So, I think...like when you said races that are together will be able to empathize more, then you get better, well not necessarily better results, but the conversations are...a little different” (FG,132-134/5.21.07). Elle, on the other hand, vacillated between opening the group to other races and keeping the group homogeneous:

...we also talked about whether or not it should just be just open to African-Americans since we are African-Americans – I don’t know how we would pull someone else in. (That’s just my personal opinion.) Not saying it can’t be done, not saying it shouldn’t be done, but I don’t know. (I2,143-146/8.1.07)

Trust was identified as an essential component of the teacher study group, and the participants felt that this facilitated their interactions with one another.

Use of Call and Response

Call and response is a technique that is widely used in the Black church. This verbal exchange between the preacher and the Amen corner (pews reserved on both sides of the church where the older and prominent members of the church sit) usually results in other members of the congregation shouting phrases such as “Preach preacher!” that encourages the preacher to continue with the fervent message (Broaddus, 2006). Members of the teacher study group used this technique as other members made a point that was understood by other members of the group (FN/2.26.07, 3.26.07, 4.23.07, 5.21.07). When one member expressed about her disgust of *No Child Left Behind* during

one of the meetings, you could hear the buzz of the other teachers saying, “I know that’s right!” and “You’d better say it!” (TSG #/4/3.26.07) which got the speaker excited and she continued her lambaste of educational policy at the federal level. If the speaker felt as if she could not get “a witness” [others who agreed], she would question members of the group using phrases such as “You know what I’m sayin’?” and “Can you feel me?” in order to confirm that she was not alone in her thinking. The participants consistently supported each other in this manner during meetings as well as during the focus group. During the final interview, I had to ask the teachers to remain passionate about the topic, but to keep in mind that I had to be able to hear what the speaker was saying in order to transcribe the conversation accurately (FN/5.21.07).

Nonverbal Gesturing

The group members showed a high level of respect for the speaker during each session (FN/5.15.07). In order to minimize interruptions while others were talking, members were observed rolling their eyes in disapproval of educational reform (TSG #4/3.26.07) and during a discussion of the lack of parent involvement at our school (TSG #2/2.26.07). The members also showed their excitement and agreement with the speaker by pointing at her (TSG #8/5.7.07); nodding (TSG#9/5.15.07); and getting out of their seats to give one another “high fives” (TSG #3/3.5.07). Another method that the participants used for supporting one another was their attentiveness to the speaker through the use of direct eye contact with the speaker. The speaker garnered the respect of her audience, and as she looked around the room she made eye contact with all other members present in the room. Rarely were teachers seen looking away or down when addressing the group (FN/5.15.07). The last non-verbal gesture that was observed during

every meeting occurred during interruptions (especially intercom announcements). Our meetings were scheduled on the same day as student support team (SST) meetings. When one of the teachers was called to their student's SST meeting, she not only rolled her eyes, but she stomped out of the room as well (TSG #7/4.23.07). Announcements were met with pouting lips, distorted faces, and looks at the offending intercom speaker willing the noise emanating from it to cease.

The Use of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Slang

African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), also referred to as Ebonics or Black English, is a rule-governed dialect commonly used by African-Americans (Charity, Scarborough, & Griffin, 2004). During the first meeting, the participants were observed using Standard English (SE) consistently; however, as time progressed and they became more relaxed, they began to code switch and lapsed between the more formal register of SE and the more informal AAVE, depending on the topic of discussion or their mood (RJ/7.6.07). Although AAVE has a variety of language patterns, the characteristics mostly used by the participants were the realization of the final /ng/, and the use of *ain't* as a "general negative indicator" (Charity, Scarborough, & Griffin, 2004, p. 1340).

Realization of the final /ng/

Realization of the final /ng/ occurs in words that end in *ing*. For example, *tripping* is pronounced as *trippin* (Charity, Scarborough, & Griffin, 2004). Deletion of /g/ in these words can be seen in the transcriptions of the individual and group interviews as well as the teacher study group sessions. At first, I thought that this could be attributed to our southern traditions and colloquialism, but leaving off the final consonant sound in words follows this rule of Black English.

Use of ain't as a general negative indicator

Ain't, linguistically speaking, can be substituted where Standard English would use *am not*, *isn't*, *aren't*, *haven't* and *hasn't*, a trait which is not specific to AAVE (Charity, Scarborough, & Griffin, 2004). During one of the teacher study group meetings, Cheryl expressed her unwillingness to use our outdated social studies text, and she emphatically stated, "I ain't doing it, and I said *ain't*!" (TSG#6/4.16.07). Not only did she use the word *ain't*, she informed the group that she intentionally did not use SE, smirked, and repeated herself for emphasis.

Slang

Slang was used frequently throughout group discussion when the conversation addressed more personal feelings about education or one another. One exchange that demonstrates the use of AAVE and slang simultaneously occurred when Elle shared with the group that sometimes she goes home and cries when she feels that her students are not successful. Cheryl offered Elle reassurance by sharing the success of Elle's former third-grade student who was a fourth grader in Cheryl's class and expressed how she loves teaching Elle's former students:

You're the bomb! Everyone in here handles her business. If you only see a 1-2 point increase on the CRCT, you did your job because they improved. It's not a reflection of you because you did what you needed to do. Don't ever feel like you're not doin' what you need to do. I have not had the opportunity to see everyone teach, [but] I know that you're handlin' your business. Elle, you don't need to be stressed when you go home or cry when you go home. (TSG#8/5.7.07)

The phrases "you are the bomb" and "handlin' your business" let Elle know that she is an excellent teacher who has control of her classroom. At this point in the study, Cheryl has not visited all of the participants' classrooms, but from our conversations she can tell that

they are competent themselves and offers them the same complement. Amber indicated that she appreciated being able to speak without feeling that she had to “translate” for participants who were not of the same culture if slang was used:

I don't think that it would have been as colorful because I don't know if we would have all been truly honest you see what I'm sayin'?...about some of the things we see 'cause you never want to offend anyone. With certain things, there's just a language we speak because we're Black – it's just that way, you see what I'm sayin'? Certain things I don't necessarily have to give you the background of because as a Black person, you understand, and I don't think you could let go and say, “Look, this is what's happening” without having to give a whole lot of extra explanation. But because we're all Black, there's an understanding that we have amongst each other. (FG,98-105/5.21.07)

The topic resurged at the conclusion of the focus group interview as Cheryl expressed her feelings concerning the subject:

If I say, “We're down like four flats [tires],” I don't need to stop my train of thought to consider that some other people may not understand. Y'all know what I'm talkin' about, but if someone else was in here, I would have to stop what I'm sayin' to let them know that this phrase simply means that “we're cool.” By that time, we could have moved on to something else. (FG,919-923/5.21.07)

The use of AAVE and slang occurred naturally in the verbal exchanges among the teachers, and the relaxed atmosphere was attributed to the organization and structure of the teacher study group sessions.

Organization and Structure

The participants commented that the structure of the teacher study group sessions encouraged them to speak freely and encouraged group interaction. During the first session I explained that I would be the facilitator of the next meeting and they would take turns facilitating the remaining groups. The teachers seemed to still view me as the leader and facilitator of each session although one of their colleagues generated the questions

for the discussion. When they asked questions of me that I felt could be better answered by the other group members, I replied, “I don’t know, ask the experts” (RJ/4.6.07).

Sometimes asking the experts resulted in conversations that lasted until 5:00 p.m. or until a participants’ child stated that he/she was ready to go home (FN/5.15.07). Feasting also encouraged our long talks into dinner. As we fellowshiped, we always had some type of snack, and on three occasions I provided a home cooked meal (I also made plates for the participants’ children). Another salient feature of the structure of the group was my consideration of the participants as graduate students. Since all of the participants were students, I wanted them to view their participation in the group as mutually beneficial. We dedicated the last 30 minutes of each session to discussing coursework and answering questions they may have had concerning assignments, class discussions, etc. Armed with their copies of *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children*, *Language, Culture, and the Assessment of African American Children* by Asa Hilliard, and participant journals (provided by me), the participants had the resources that they needed in order to read and discuss issues related to current issues and trends in education and pedagogy.

Use of Reading as Point of Departure for Discussion around Issues that Needed to be Discussed

The text was used as a catalyst for encouraging teacher talk. Although Ladson-Billings’ work focused on culturally relevant pedagogy, the selected readings steered the conversations in different directions. Holly summarized the impact of the book on the discussions in her final interview:

I think sometimes when you say teacher study group people look at it as a more of an academic when we’re going to stick with things that are

research-based or things are kinda boring. But I think even with the book that we chose as a teacher study group it wasn't so much, what do call like one of those regular textbooks that you get in the classroom? But it was more of these are my experiences and I know that this works better and I think that with that type of book it's much easier to read and get the conversation going than with a book that talks about...a particular technique in general. So for me I guess going into my expectations was, "Oh okay, here's another technique that we're going to learn per se." But then it didn't come out that way, it came more of these are my personal experiences and a lot of them do relate to what was in the book. (I2,420-430/6.26.07)

The text-to-world connection permitted other topics that directly or indirectly affected the teachers' lives to be conversation pieces. I led the second teacher study group in which we had to respond to the first chapter of our seminal text and a piece written by Asa Hilliard. I juxtaposed two quotes as think pieces for the participants that suggest that Black children are inferior to their White counterparts:

Basically, the erroneous core assumption is that African American children are nothing more than incomplete copies of Western European white children. (Hilliard, 2002, p. 92)

It is presumed that African American children are exactly like white children but just need a little extra help. (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 9)

These quotes elicited very strong responses from the participants who overwhelmingly felt that *if* Black children are inferior, their weakness stems from an educational system that promotes institutionalized racism:

Kim: Who's incomplete? Our children are whole and I'm sick and tired of these "experts" always pointing the finger at our kids. Yeah, our kids may need a different type of learning environment that is structured, but to say they're incomplete is absurd... (TSG#2/2.26.07)

Cheryl: How in the world can anybody say that we're exactly like White people? We don't look like 'em or act like 'em. As a matter of fact, I'll put some of our worst kids up against their best. That's what's wrong with society – they're always comparing this group and that group and playing them against one another. ...and schools promote this White versus Black mess. (TSG#2/2.26.07)

Amber's desire to be a school leader was recognized by the administrative team of Grant Elementary school, and she served as a teacher on special assignment at various times throughout the school year. This opportunity provided Amber with experiences that one only receives once he/she has been assigned to a leadership position. She witnessed teachers who struggled with relational discipline of students which resulted in a high number of discipline referrals each day:

I just want to say whenever this implementation of helping teachers to help manage Black children or whatever... whenever it's going to start – can it please start immediately? ...Something is wrong, and they [students] need some assistance and some of these teachers need some assistance with dealing with these children. 'Cause some of the things that come to the office [discipline] is bad behavior... but some of this, the kids are doing the best that they can and sending them home [shook her head]... something is not working. (TSG#3/3.5.07)

Noticing that she had the attention of the other participants, she continued

I was watching *Building the Dream* with Oprah, and they asked her why she didn't put her school in America, and she said that because in the United States of America the people who govern education have nothing to do with the outcome of children. They [Africans] appreciate education because everyone doesn't have it. In America, it's like they don't think about that because everybody comes to school, so it doesn't matter. Learning is a choice, no one can really make you learn. What does it do by making children come to school? Other countries seem to appreciate education more than we do in this country, and it's not just Black people, it's across the board. A lot of people take it for granted 'cause if you don't do nothing else, you can come to school. (Amber/TSG#3/3.5.07)

A discussion ensued concerning compulsory attendance laws and most of the participants did not realize that school in Georgia is not mandatory until age seven (RJ/3.5.07). In the next teacher study group meeting on Ladson-Billings' chapter, "Seeing Color, Seeing Culture," our discussion of Black students once again became a focal point of dialogue between grade level teammates Amber and Elle:

Amber: I've talked to other teachers in different schools and counties and they are all saying the same thing about our Black children – they're disrespectful, they don't want to learn, and I don't know if that's the kids, culture, color, society...

Elle: It's priorities. It all starts at home and I don't see parents really emphasizing the importance of school – why you need to go, what you can get when you're there – I really don't see that.

Amber: It wasn't until reading this book [*Dreamkeepers*] I didn't know that we as teachers – so many things that we don't say is saying something to students – even the way we dress sends a message to our students. (TSG#3/3.26.07)

One month later Cheryl voiced her concerns about the perceived apathy of Black students: “This is the first year that I've seen that students do not value education and the reason that you're [students] sitting up in here [classroom] is because someone is valuing it *for you*” (TSG#7/4.23.07). The indifference that teachers are witnessing in African-American students may affect teachers who enter who enter the profession:

Amber: Nobody will want to teach our kids. If you look at legislation and how things are going, these are going to be the kids that no one wants to teach. If your job is tied to student performance, you will want to teach children who will exceed, and it's going to be our children who are going to suffer who need that...we need to teach *our* children because there are certain things that only you understand because you're Black – it's just that simple.

Karen: It's getting hard for us to even teach our own kids...

Tina: It's exhausting every day because they need even more than you can give them and you get worn out because you can't give everything to them.

Amber: Then they hear on t.v. where some man [Don Imus] felt comfortable enough to call our girls, “Nappy headed hoes.” It's just like my mama said, you can talk about your brother and call him everything in the book, but someone else better not say it because it will be a situation. (TSG#7/4.23.07)

The participants became anxious when they thought about the next generation of teachers and students, but vowed to remain committed to the profession. They felt that they were needed to usher in the next group of great educators because African-American students need dedicated, African-American teachers to combat the negative stereotypes and images that are perpetuated in the media and other sources that compete with school for the students' attention (RJ/5.23.07). Because an overwhelmingly high number of our students are inundated with societal and personal issues at a young age, the participants also sought strategies from the educators featured in the seminal text to provide examples of educative practices that could be implemented in their classrooms.

Use of Reading as a Point of Departure for Teaching Pedagogy

Ladson-Billings (1994) asserts, "There is very little reliable literature on preparing teachers for diversity. And almost nothing exists on teacher preparation specifically for African American students" (p. 7). A long pause filled the room as Holly repeated the question that I initially posed to the entire group, "Do we think that we should revamp teacher preparation courses to address the needs of Black students?" The participants agreed that life experiences prepared them for dealing with African-American children, but this generation is very different from any other who has matriculated through our classrooms. They also admitted that they could not name specific courses that may be helpful in a prospective teacher's program of study, but Holly felt that Black children needed teachers who would provide "exposure" (TSG#2/2.26.07) and Tina responded, "If I had the answer [to address revamping teachers preparation courses], we wouldn't need this group" (TSG#2/2/26/07). The group was unable to name specific qualities of a "good" teacher for African-American students;

however, they discussed methods that they used in their classrooms that seem to instill pride in their students.

Holly and Cheryl felt that increasing students' research skills through project-based instruction was an important method for obtaining information on a variety of African-Americans are vastly different from the ones that we were assigned to study as students. Tina alluded to the diversity that exists within the Black community which eliminates any notion of having one approach that is effective for teaching all African-American students:

Holly: When my kids have to do Black history projects, I assign their people because they hear enough about Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks...

Cheryl: My students create an A-Z book – they bind it, publish, and laminate it...I don't put limitations on who they choose, teaching does not stop in that classroom. If you want it bad enough, you can go get it, I just give you the opportunities to make it happen. And I don't allow them to give up. I enjoy it because some of the stuff they put in their books, I didn't know. I hook them based on their interests.

Tina: We're all African-Americans, but we can't be categorized in the same group because just because she's African-American, so am I we don't listen to the same types of music, we don't like the same sports because we're different.

Holly: We can have high expectations, but some students need an extra push. (TSG#2/2.26.07)

The participants may not have been able to outline courses that would prepare teachers for teaching African-American students, but after completing the reading that defined culturally relevant pedagogy, Holly asked each of them to list characteristics of a teacher who integrated culture into his/her classroom instruction:

Holly: You can learn as much from your students as they learn from you.

Tina: Culturally relevant teachers should be knowledgeable about each student's background, their culture, customs that they celebrate, different holidays, and their beliefs about education. I say this because this area is turning into a great big melting pot. It's not your traditional Black family, your traditional White family – we have everything in between. It's coming to the point now when holidays that we have taken for granted, we don't celebrate anymore [in school] because it's offensive to this family. It helps to be knowledgeable about each person individually (PJ/3.5.07).

Cheryl: Characteristics of a culturally relevant teacher...I put passion, understanding, discipline, respect, be sincere, be inquisitive, knowledge, show creativity, and have true feelings – really care about your students. Nine times out of ten they [students] can see through that if you're not being honest (PJ/3.5.07).

Tasha: Trying to teach for understanding, basically not only understanding what's going on with the lesson, but with the children also whether it be culture or whether it be from family to family. We may all be African-Americans so to speak, but we may have something different going on in our households. A culturally relevant teacher would understand the different cultures so she/[he] can relate the culture to the learning no matter what it takes. If you teach that way, they [students] can relay it back to you. (PJ/3.5.07)

The importance of building relationships with African-American students and teachers' dedication to the profession reverberated throughout the study, and the participants believed that these issues are paramount to teaching African-American children. In a discussion of cultural relevance, Cheryl questioned the commitment of some of her colleagues to improving teaching and learning and suggested that an organizational system should be created that would encourage unmotivated teachers to seek a career change. According to Cheryl, when teachers understand that commitment is a prerequisite to becoming an educator, will we see an improvement in teaching and learning:

What I find with a lot of teachers is they're saying the right things, but they're not doing the right things. They're talkin' the talk, but they're not walkin' the walk. I see a lot of cookie cutter type things, "Oh I love the kids," but if a child asks him/her to warm up their food, they go off and

say that it's not their job. That's what I see as a big problem with teachers. Where is your heart, where is your passion? I probably have six or seven students in my classroom waiting on me (it was 4:02 p.m.). My teaching does not stop at 2:30 [p.m.]. A lot of teachers should not be teachers and that's the reason why there not reaching them the way they should. I'm not saying that you have to do what I do, but they should find their own niche. Once you start weeding out those teachers who truly want to be here, you will see a turnaround. (TSG#2/2.26.07)

Ladson-Billings (1994) suggests, "When students are treated as competent they are likely to demonstrate competence" (p. 124). The teacher study group members concurred and added that not only should students be perceived as knowledgeable, teachers must be able to demonstrate proficiency in eliciting correct responses from their students:

People act like you treat them. If people tell you that you won't amount to anything, you'll start believing it. A student who is not that confident – once I validate something that may be the opposite for them, then they'll more likely to perform. (Holly/TSG#9/5.21.07)

Readings from *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children*

evoked the participants' childhood memories of being African-American students.

Personal and emotional aspects were shared and the members were not ashamed to share negative experiences that remained painful decades after the incidences occurred:

Holly: I can tell you the names of the African-American students who I graduated with. I felt that the school didn't do enough to meet my needs as far as what we're talking about [culturally relevant pedagogy]. There weren't any Black or African-American people in the book and even if they had one or two, they're looking at me like "You explain this"...

Tina: Or they'll skip over it...

Cheryl: Do you know how she feels?

Tina: This happened to me.

Holly: I didn't have any pride in my race because I only saw negative things [in textbooks]. (TSG#3/3/5/07)

Experience has been named life's best teacher, and the participants use their classrooms to teach students that they are valued and possess the ability to learn and be successful by American's standards. Although the teachers are unable to protect their students from all of the injustices of our society, their collective mission is to prepare them as best as they can (RJ/7.23.07).

Other characteristics of the teacher study group may have present, but were overshadowed by establishing trust, the use of call and response, non-verbal gesturing, the use of AAVE and slang, and the organization and structure of the group (including the use of readings as a point of departure for discussion of both critical issues and pedagogy). These components of the teacher study group provided an environment that was conducive for the honest, emotionally-filled conversations that took place. Creating a safe space was paramount in ensuring that the four remaining research questions under investigation were answered.

CHAPTER 5

THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD UNVEILED

As African-Americans we've had to overcome a lot to get to this place, and I just want it so bad[ly] for 'em [her students] – I really want them to be somebody 'cause more about what they know, I care about who they are and I want them to grow up and to be like education is like, you know, education is like the fish that will allow you to eat for life – nobody can take that from you, NOBODY. (Amber/I2,233-237/7.2.07)

The chapter begins with an exploration of themes that were discussed in the teacher study group forum that utilized culturally relevant pedagogy as the focal point of conversation. Next, the impact of the study group on the participants' views about literacy, the literacy curriculum, and their classroom teaching will be revealed. A comparison of this professional learning experience with others conducted by the district follows. The unveiling of the yellow brick road concludes with the participants' views concerning my influence on their professional growth through my involvement in the group.

Themes of the Teacher Study Group

Eight themes were discussed most often during the teacher study group; however, responses given during the three interviews also reflected their opinions concerning the topics that dominated group conversations. Dialogue centered on the following topics and themes: a) administrative support; b) the plight of Black boys; c) parental involvement; d) curriculum mandates and unrealistic academic expectations; e) spirituality; f) collegiality; g) fighting the status quo; and h) building relationships.

Administrative Support

The teachers expressed that they needed to feel that their efforts are respected and valued by those in charge. Trusting teachers' judgment as professionals who are proficient in their craft was very important to Cheryl, who not only discussed this type of support in her individual interview, but commented on the topic in the fourth teacher study group as well. Cheryl stated she must have a good relationship with administrators and suggested that if school leaders capitalize on the strengths of their faculties, the school's mission and vision will be attained:

Use the people on your team for what they are good for doing. We should not be hung up on titles. We are in this together. I need to be at a school where I can be cool with the administrator. If I look good, you look good. (Cheryl/TSG#4/3.26.07)

The participants also talked about facilitative leadership where administrators include teachers in decision-making. Teachers want to work with administrators who welcome new and fresh ideas and applaud their willingness to "think outside [of] the box" even if the strategies that are being used are not necessarily aligned with the prescribed curriculum. After exhaling, Holly responded to my question about her perceptions of the type of leadership that she would like to see (see Appendix G) by stating that administrators should be "supportive...and willing to have – and is okay with their staff taking risks" (I2,276-277/6.26.07). Cheryl also mentioned support of the teacher when I asked her how we could support her classroom instruction (see Appendix G):

...you know, supporting the teacher if the teacher's trying to do something to improve that student – don't frown upon it...because it wasn't his or her idea. You know, support that and build upon it and also allow each teacher to do his or her unique thing in their classroom. (Cheryl/I1,36-40/1.29.07)

Autonomy in the classroom was mentioned as distant memory of the veteran teachers.

Teaching in the age of accountability has necessitated that documentation be provided in a manner that was unheard of in past years in education. I constantly and consistently ask the teachers for various assessment results and anecdotal notes on their students' progress as required by the district. Teachers have complained, but they understand that paperwork has become an unwelcome part of their jobs. The insurmountable quantities of documentation that must be provided prompted Karen to question whether or not administrators' support is contradictory:

I would say it appears that I'm getting it [support], and I hear it, but I often question if it's really true. You know, you hear that we're here to support you, I'm here to support you, but on the other hand, you're constantly stacking more and more on me. So it seems like I'm drowning, basically drowning. It's to the point to where I'm considering looking for another job outside of teaching – it's just too much paperwork. (Karen/11,221-224,63-64/1.18.07)

The participants realized that school-level administrators have very limited input on the requirements from the district, but that does not negate the fact that teachers have large amounts of extraneous requirements that may have other teachers thinking of leaving the profession as well.

Public perceptions of individual schools are significant to our school district. A new system has been implemented which monitors the numbers of complaints and compliments that a school receives yearly, and principals have explained this new procedure to their faculties. Most of the participants have served as teachers on special assignment where they have worked in administrative capacity for at least one day, and have witnessed school decisions overturned when appealed at the district level. Having courage to stand up for your beliefs when children are the beneficiaries of your efforts

was named as a means of support as well “...and we need more support. Well because...there are certain policies that are put in place by the district. And then, when the parent calls, the policy doesn’t matter. It’s just like making the parents happy” (Amber/FG,394,400-402/5.21.07). Holly blamed lack of district support for principals’ contentment with the status quo “they put all of this pressure on principals, but they don’t give principals any power. Until principals get power, they are reluctant to make any changes” (TSG#4/3.26.07). During a conversation on culturally relevant teaching, I asked the group to comment on a situation that I was facing concerning a teacher. By that time, we had completed eight teacher study group sessions, and I felt that they would be honest with me because I needed support at this point before I redressed the incident. The following dialogue ensued:

Charnita: What do you do when a parent complains about the teacher berating children and you know that the concern is true and you’ve talked to the teacher?

Karen: With the parent present, you must support your teacher, but when the parent leaves, you do what you need to do to that teacher. You do not degrade that teacher.

Kim: When you have gone to that teacher and addressed your concerns, that’s a way that the teacher can get herself in check [fix the problem]. You’ve done your part. If she decides to do whatever she wants, that’s on her and she needs the consequences that are coming to her.

Amber: Leaders are like politicians – you have to save face for the public. To the parent, you must present a united front ‘cause if you don’t, the community will break down. One parent will talk to another and another. They feel that they can come to the school and say whatever to the teacher and feel vindicated. Is it wrong? Yes. Do you admit it? No. It’s like George Bush and the war [in Iraq]; he’ll never admit failure. (TSG#9/5.15.07)

Once again, support for the teacher was paramount to the participants. Regardless of the teacher’s role in the ordeal, they were concerned about preserving the teacher’s self-

respect, especially in the presence of a parent who may criticize the teacher publicly thinking that he/she had the full support of school leaders.

The participants were females who dealt with numerous issues that were not school-related, but indirectly may have impacted their job performance. Depending on the nature of the situation, they may not have been able to separate their personal lives from their professional lives. When situations caused a temporary decline in their performance, the participants needed administrators to view them as nurturers who may sometimes need nurturing:

You know, they're very supportive of me too, and I know that I've had to be honest with some personal issues that I've had. And feeling that it's okay to be upset and it's okay and not feel okay you're going through this, so it's your problem don't worry about it. I feel that that they're very supportive and to me, in order to have a good staff, you have to have to not only care about your teachers as far as what they do in the classroom, but they're personal lives too because it has an affect on their product. (Holly/I1,268-274/2.1.07)

If you let your teachers know that you see them as a person with feelings because sometimes you just don't want to be bothered. When you work with a person who understands that, I mean...my family is dealing with a lot of sickness and the staff of this school has supported me every step of the way. Nobody's ever called and said, "We need you to come back to work." I had to leave [for a family emergency] and grades were due. Ms. West called me and asked, "How's your dad?" There was no mention about the grades at all. The leadership has supported me every step of the way. And that means a lot because when I am here, I'll put in 120 percent. I know that I'm working for people who care about me, about Amber. This pushes me to go the extra mile without hesitation, and I think that some leaders are missing that. If you try to be the boss, you will lose every time. (Amber/TSG#4/3.26.07)

Teachers are humans who have affective needs and supporting them in this manner will assist them in feeling better about themselves and their job duties. Compassion for teachers is another method in which administrators can support them.

Teachers are constantly scrutinized by local and district administrators, parents, as well as the general public on a daily basis. The participants, especially Cheryl, discouraged the use of titles as signs of superiority and inferiority. She, along with other colleagues in the group, stressed that educating children was a collaborative effort among all stakeholders, and everyone who is employed in a school should share the responsibility of teaching and learning:

One of my pet peeves is when a principal, administrator or whatever says, “When I was a teacher...” You are still a teacher, you are just on a different level. [Imitating an administrator] “When I was a teacher, I did this.” Well get back in the classroom, don’t tell me. When you come to me at me like that I feel like you’re saying you’re above me, but we’re on the same page [to help] the children. (Cheryl/TSG#4/3.26.07)

That’s one thing that I like about the leadership here [Grant Elementary]. If you make people feel that you are in there with them, they will do. You can’t be everywhere as a principal. Some people are supervisors...if I’m your boss, I’m gonna be right there with you, so I can see who’s doing what and document and do what I need to do. As a principal, you can’t be everywhere, so you have to be able to make your people feel like, “Hey, I’m in this with you and we’re all in this thing together.” We must celebrate the successes together and the thing is that we are all going to try *together*. And I think that’s the thing that principals are missing. (Amber/TSG#4/3.26.07)

Amber emphasized the word *together* in her statement because administrators and teachers must work collaboratively for our students. (A discussion of the participants’ views on including parents in the educative process will occur later in this chapter.) As the discussion leader for Chapter 3, “Seeing Color, Seeing Culture,” Amber drew our attention to a quote, “When we see ourselves as a team that works together, we can do anything” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 31). When teachers and administrators take a collective stand in the interests of our students we will become invincible.

Plight of Black Boys

The attitude of African-American male students seemed to confound the participants. Their aggressiveness often resulted in referrals to the discipline office, but Tasha proposed that the school should provide additional opportunities (such as the chess club) for Black boys that may focus their energy on something positive, teach them self-discipline, and reduce the number of behavior infractions that occur:

And when you have our African-American males [who] don't have anything else to do, and they don't have any support at home – we have no where else to channel it, so their behavior is kinda, it goes back, it falls back on us, and we don't have a lot that we can do. I mean, you can suspend them, you can give them Saturday school, but what else? They need another outlet; they need something else to do that maybe they... 'cause everyone can't pay to go have karate classes. We need to have some other things for those children to do. (I1,96-102/1.26.07)

The second study group began the dialogue among the participants on the plight of Black boys:

Amber: I think that our children come to school with a lot of issues- they bring a lot of baggage to school. My boys...you can say one thing to them and they're angry. That anger just manifests in them. Any type of conformity, but I think it comes from some place else. It just comes out, they will strike out. It's just anger.

Holly: We talked about this in class – Are they EBD or socially maladjusted? [Talks about a student in her class and imitates him].
“Something that you did to me reminded me of something that happened at home, and that's why I'm so upset.”

Tina: They don't have the opportunities to be children. They have so many responsibilities single-parent households, they have to take care of little brother little sister, they're cooking, they're cleaning, they're ironing, they're changing the baby's diapers, they're up late into the night and they don't have the time to be a child and be a kid and function.

Amber: I have a kid who gets up at five to give the baby the bottle and get the other kids dressed for school. He is the man of the house and home, but has to come to school and be a child. So when you're running it at home you want to run it at school too. Kids don't know how to multi-task

and wear those different hats like adults do. So I don't think that they can come to school and receive authority when they are *the* authority at home.

Cheryl: I've dealt with students who are considered at-risk. They [boys] feel that you don't hear me. They'll listen to you as long as you feel that you are also listening to them. You have to let them know that even as an adult, you are not always right. But you also have to let them know that they must respect her authority as the teacher. You have to sometimes get on their level by talking to them and understanding them...To reach these young Black men you have to let them know that "I'm hungry like you, if I'm cut, I'll bleed like you" because they don't see that. To them you're [the] teacher, I'm grown, you have to break [through] that and you'll reach them.

Amber: The boys, their problem is anger. My girls, they just want to belong because they're social issues, but boys, they internalize the problems of the world. (TSG#2 2/26/07)

Girls in these teachers' classes seemed to have problems that can be easily solved through peer mediation or a conference with the teacher. Black boys, on the other hand, appeared to have more deeply rooted issues that results anger and aggression. Many of these teachers' male students were the men of the house and they were unable to delineate between being the authority figure at home and respecting authority at school (RJ/2.27.07). Black males' lack of respect for certain people in authority had the participants worried about their future, and Amber shared startling statistics from an article which revealed that "a Black man is 50 times more likely to go to prison than to graduate from high school." Karen, shaking her head, replied, "And that's why they're constantly building them [prisons]" (TSG#7/4.23.07).

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement (or lack thereof) is a pervasive problem throughout our school. The participants were committed to teaching their students with or without the help of their parents, but preferred for parents to become actively involved and lend

support to their children at school and at home. Elle had strong views about parental participation, and thought that the district should be more vigilant in encouraging parental support:

I think our county needs to have some kind of program, and maybe they do and I don't know about it, but to really help our parents help their children. And I know a lot of people say, "When you receive these kids, they're yours, don't worry about what was or was not done at home," and I don't, but I still think kids need that help and that support from mom and dad. And maybe if our county can some kind of way get our parents more involved in their child's life – it'll make a difference. (I1,124-130/1.18.07)

Amber also sensed that parental involvement was important, and felt slighted when parents were respected more than teachers, "in some ways, we're doing more than the parents, but they're getting more respect" (TSG#4/3.26.07). Amber and Tina admitted that they made adjustments in their requirements outside of class for students whose parents showed limited interest:

You have some kids who will take assignments home and do what they have to do, but you have others who you will need to modify their work from at home assignments to in-class projects in order for you to get the work back. (TSG#3/3.5.07)

I have a parent who has a seventh grade education and she admits that she can't help her son at home because she feels that there's nothing she can do. We have to let parents know that there's no guide to parenting. You just need to do the best that you can and no one is judging you. (TSG #2/2.26.07)

Parental support seemed to be a problem for schools having a predominately African-American population. After reading Ladson-Billings' (1994) chapter on instilling a sense of family in the classroom, I was curious to know whether or not the participants felt that their colleagues who teach in the north end of the district go to the same extent as they do in order to build relationships and reach their students. This question began a lengthy discussion that also motivated our more quiet participants to speak

Charnita: Do you think that teachers who teach predominately European-American children have to go to the same lengths that you do?

Amber: No, I don't think so [everyone else shakes their heads].

Charnita: Why?

Amber: The school is an extension of home – they came ready.

Kim: Exactly. They probably don't deal with the same issues that our children have to deal with.

Karen: You'll find those same parents in the class watching you more, trying to determine what you're doing in order to teach their children. How you're actually teaching their kids; they're more involved. That's what I see – in back of you, over you to see if you're teaching little Johnny.

Mandy: Coming from a school district where there were only two or three African-American teachers and the majority Caucasian teachers and White students, the parents are in the classrooms more and ask, "What else can I do in order for my child to get an A?" whereas the African-American parents don't show up. If they show up, [it is because] the child was in a fight or something like that, it's not about the academics.

Kim: A lot of times it's about survival. You need to go to school to learn. I don't think [Black] parents have that talk with them. With Caucasian kids, it's about school – *that's* your job, *that's* your business.

Tina: It's more of where we place the value. It's sad to say, but our kids are going to be well-dressed, new tennis shoes, the newest technology and come to school and don't have pencil and paper. They don't have the things that are needed to be successful in school. (TSG#5/4.9.07)

The participants reported that some parents placed their priorities in areas that did not include education unlike parents who reside in the northern part of the district. Our problems are not theirs because their children understand that education is a top priority. While analyzing student work, Kim resurrected another conversation about parental support with her colleagues:

Kim: Why is it that the majority of the time our struggles in the classroom basically comes from the parents not doing what they should do? Most

teachers do what they're supposed to do. A lot of it comes from parents not doing their part...not being at home with them, not checking homework, making sure that they have a routine – teaching them how to eat at a dinner table.

Amber: Research says that parental support drops off as the children go through school. Mine was so low in kindergarten [when she was a kindergarten teacher]...

Kim: It [parental support] won't exist by second grade! ..It's not fair. It doesn't matter how many reforms, curriculum designs, and how many times you move the parents [referring to administrative transfers that are given when parents are dissatisfied with their child's home school]...until something is put in place for the parents to make them accountable as well, it's really not going to change.

Karen: We are living in a different day and time. Parents – they don't value education like we do and like our parents did. They don't realize that this is going to be an uneducated young man or young lady and that's what hurts me so bad[ly]. When the kids see that education is not that important to the parents, it's not important to the children

Tina: We have to defend ourselves against the child because the parents believe them.

Holly: It all goes back to where is our pride and self-respect in everything we do. This filters into education because if the parents are indifferent, the children become indifferent too. (TSG#7/4.23.07)

Parental involvement was a topic that arose in almost every teacher study group session because of the impact parents have on the instructional program. The participants did not rely on parents in order to teach; however, as Holly pointed out, students become nonchalant about school when their parents are modeling this behavior at home. On the other hand, the absence of some parents has been misconstrued as apathy whereas they may have felt intimidated by teachers who (in some cases) have received a more formal education. In other cases, our parents put more emphasis on material possessions than on their children's education.

Curriculum/Unrealistic Mandates and Expectations

No Child Left Behind was an oxymoron to the participants. One of the participants believed that “more children will be left behind because teachers will resort to teaching the test and our students will not be taught the basic skills to get a decent job” (Tina/FG/5.21.07). The participants also wondered how they were supposed to ensure that all students function at similar academic levels when instruction is not commensurate with their abilities:

Trying to get every child on one level is impossible and I want to be real about this, I don't think it will ever be...every child cannot be on the same level, especially when you have children that come to you with learning disabilities... they will never be on the same level as a high level achiever. (Mandy/I1,98-101/2.23.07)

No Child Left Behind, that is a phrase. To me, that's a phrase, but reality...they're [students] not all on the same level, and the one's you think are on the same level, they're not on the same level, even with gifted – they're not on the same level so I just feel like you have to reach the children where they are, whether you use *No Child Left Behind* or if you're just using your own morals. (Tasha/I1,206-210/1.26.07)

Mandy and Tasha's sentiment was echoed by the rest of the group as they discussed the law and the ramifications on classroom instruction. Their conversations indicated that they understood the need for accountability, but the implementation was perplexing and sanctions targeted schools comprised of African-American children:

...with *No Child Left Behind* I believe that it puts more of an accountability on us as far as making sure that we really don't pass the kids and making sure that we see that they're getting exactly what they need. (Kim/I1,131-133/1.21.07)

I really think that it [*No Child Left Behind*] is has harmed our African-American children. They say no child is left behind, but what I've found within the last, I'd say two years that I've seen a lot of children left behind. Honestly. You know...I don't event think it was titled properly. What about “Every child left behind”? Honestly, I mean or “The majority of the minority is left behind?” (Karen/I1,165-169/1.18.07)

To be honest, I use *No Child Left Behind* as a tool for my African-American students to let them know [that] this is just another tool for them try to get you, keep you back. ...when you come to school and if you cut up and you act a fool, you come to school, don't get your lesson, *No Child Left Behind Act* will make you stay back. (Cheryl/I1,103-109/1.29.07)

The Criterion-Referenced Competency Test determines whether or not our school makes adequate yearly progress (AYP). Although the administration of the test is not until April, the stress of this assessment on academics is felt throughout the year:

...I would spend a little more time, if I could, on getting to know my students, but because of *No Child Left Behind*, there's certain things I have to be sure to get in, so it kinda takes away from that. It's kinda taking away from my instruction in some ways that I don't really like. I usually...get more personal with my students, you know, where we would spend alot more time with writing because some things...I have some children who can express in writing what they can never express in words. But I had to be sure to get that reading in, so some writing topics I had to throw out of the window. ...I didn't get to do a lot of things that I really would have like to have done in my classroom. (Amber/I1,118-122,120-132/1.22.07)

...going back to *No Child Left Behind*, to me I feel like that they don't see the progress that the children make. ...and I going to go back to *No Child Left Behind*, but I mean that's why I like teaching because you're looking at, and I'm going to use this child for example, if you are a first grader and you don't know all of these things okay let's say you're performing on a PreK level, but if that child can go from PreK level to a beginning first grader in one particular year, I felt like I have done my job, but with *No Child Left Behind*, they're just gonna give him that test and if they don't pass a first-grade test at the end of the year, then the child is a "failure". But to me, in my eyes, the child is not a failure, so *No Child Left Behind* I don't think that they are bringing that component in to see where you've brought the child from the beginning of the school year to the end of the school year. So going back to why I love teaching... (Holly/I1,282-293/2.1.07)

The ability to implement a curriculum that infuses culturally relevant pedagogy was not difficult for the participants, but they had to be very creative because the curriculum is very structured and does not have a lot of flexibility. As we discussed "The

Tree of Knowledge” (Chapter 5), I read the following passage aloud, “Instead of encouraging teachers to be prepared and willing to engage in curriculum development and knowledge building, the teacher-proof curriculum fosters and rewards those who follow the external mandates of prepackaged, predetermined curriculum, guides, textbooks, and lessons” (Ladson-Billings 1994, p. 80):

I don’t know what my expectations [for my students] are because I am told what they are. When you teach third grade, I know that the goal is to pass the test [CRCT]. So sometimes I don’t know what my personal goals for them are because I’m not really given a chance to make those goals to a certain degree. So much politics have come into education that it’s taking away from what we want for our students. My goal for some of my students is for them to have independent reading skills. Is that a Level 2 [meets the standards]? I don’t know. (Amber/TSG#3/3.5.07)

You know, I’m constantly being, well personally, I am constantly being told what I need to teach. I’m not allowed to teach your child what they don’t know per se. You know, everything now is standards-based you know, it’s no more opening up – what if I were to open up a textbook it starts at [number] one and ends on page 100. Now, I have to start on maybe five, skip to 100. You know, no we’re, no I don’t feel like I’m allowed...it’s just too much other stuff, you know. (Karen/I2,183-188/8.23.07)

...so I just feel like we’re not able to teach what we want to teach. I *love* teaching about dinosaurs, I love doing my little paper stuff that goes with the dinosaurs and teaching them about the different time periods and all that – but that doesn’t fly with GPS. So I have to teach what I’m supposed to teach and hopefully in May you get around to teaching...and now we’ve grown as educators in calling these things fun things. The things that we want the children to know that they need to know. We call it “fun stuff.” That’s not fun things, that’s a part of life. They need to know these things, but we can’t teach it. (Tasha/I2,482-489/7.25.07)

The established curriculum is inefficient alone – the state department of education gives individual districts the discretion to purchase textbooks and other resources to support instruction. The participants felt that our textbooks are insufficient to teach

...if you look at the performance standards in social studies [the standards are available; however, implementation will not take place until 2008-

2009] and science and math now, you only need only three or four chapters out the book to teach from those standards, but they may not be all the standards, but that's all your book covers. So you got, you have to go out and research as an educator what you gone do to teach these children this information. (Tasha/I2,475-480/7.25.07)

During the last study group, Kim reiterated that the textbooks could be more beneficial to classroom instruction "all of our textbooks are outdated," and her grade level teammate Holly replied, "We can only use three chapters out of the science book" (TSG#9/5.15.07).

Teacher efficacy is also affected by federal mandates that insinuate that a teachers' ability to teach is reflected by student test scores. The participants stated that their displeasure with relying solely on test scores to measure student progress does not truly measure students' academic growth. In addition, teachers would like consistency in the curriculum because by the time they get comfortable with one set of curricula, something changes:

...because we have to meet those standards, well our kids have to pass that test if not I'm gonna look bad [laughs]. So I have to get in, I'm supposed to get in all this stuff and just get it done when I know that I'm moving on, but there's about four or five [students] over there that haven't picked it up, but I have to keep it movin' and I mean, I mean yep there it is. (Mandy/I2,599-603/6.19.07)

...there are always change, change, change, change. Can we get something, try it, see if it really works before the next year we implement something NEW? Because to me...we want our kids to learn, but as a teacher, I need to be comfortable with what I'm teaching, and there's so many changes coming down the pipeline, and I'm just like, "Whew! Okay, I was doing this last year, I've got to push that to the side and try to do this year, and try to do it their way and the way they want it done, but at the same time not lose myself as a teacher while I'm doing it." (Elle/I2,299-305/8.1.07)

No Child Left Behind, I have an issue with that. Why can't we test them at the beginning of the year and the end of the year and not necessarily worry about—I have some kids who come to me and can't read and they will not

be able to score on a first-grade level on the CRCT. Does that make them or me failures? (Holly/TSG#3/3.5.07)

Not only do teachers feel pressure to produce, but Amber recognized that administrators must also address questions concerning student performance, and when building level scores are below the state average, we are not given an opportunity to explain contributing circumstances and/or factors:

We're all going that extra mile, but as a leader, you're in this box. All they want to know is if you made AYP, and if you didn't, you have a problem and there's not a place where you can tell them why. (TSG#4/3.26.07)

Elle and Tina were the only participants who decided that their first priority is to teach the students and do not allow the law to interfere with their teaching pedagogy:

Do I even really consider it [*No Child Left Behind*]? I just get in there and teach every day, Ms. West. I must be honest. Do I ever really think about it? It scares me because I want every child to do well and especially around test time...I don't know, I just try to get in there and teach every day. (Elle/I1,253-256/1.19.07)

Regardless of the participants' views about *No Child Left Behind*, the law significantly impacts the way teachers provide instruction. During our discussions and interviews, the teachers alluded to the negative impact that accountability has on teaching and learning. Because testing is a major component of schooling, the teachers reported that they relied on their personal beliefs in God as a support when their profession seemed hopeless.

Blessed Assurance

Spirituality placed a part in the participants' lives and influenced their decisions to become and remain educators. Contending with the various changes in education has allowed the participants to rely on their faith in order to deal with the changes that occur on a yearly basis. Tasha relied on the Biblical lessons that she learned from her parents:

...I was raised in a family that we just give all the time because we were raised on if you don't give, you never receive, so that's just all I know so I still live by that today whether in the classroom or out of the classroom. (Tasha/I2,61-63/7.25.07)

Karen credits prayer for helping her get through each day "...praying, that is the main thing. Every day I just have to pray and ask for a good day (I1,81-84/1.18.07). Amber referred to the ability to teach as a gift from God and Kim felt that her journey into the teaching profession was ordained by God:

We were called to teach...we didn't just become teachers. Teaching is a ministry and a gift. It is beautiful. There's a light shining on you when you're working with children. Know that challenges will come because it's a gift. We are life changers. There is a higher power that governs our lives and that's why we are in this place [Grant Elementary School] in this group [teacher study group] at this particular time. Ms. West was called to lead us to learn more about ourselves and help us become better educators and future leaders. That's why she was placed here. (Amber/TSG#4/3.26.07)

I believe that the teaching profession was chosen for me. Which means that I believe this is my calling. I believe that this is my calling. It's something I feel that the kids need, they need me. (Kim/I1,15-18/1.21.07)

Amber and Kim also talked about their reliance on their spirituality to assist them with teaching their students during the fourth teacher study group:

One of the things I do is I always pray, "Lord, whoever doesn't need to be here. Give me the ones who want to be here." I have students who I know needed to be with me this year because if nothing else – I can't necessarily relate to what they're going through, but I can pray for them. Will I get 100% on the CRCT this year? I don't know. Accountability and all that won't shape me as a teacher because I have a true heart for children. (Amber/TSG#4/3.26.07)

When you feel that you don't know if you're getting through to your kids. I take a lot of things that I do from a spiritual standpoint too, but I think that's when God uses you and He speaks through you to your kids. And if you've got a big head, He can't use you. It's when you're at your most humble state that He can use you. He uses that moment [when you doubt your abilities] to speak to your kids. (Kim/TSG#4/3.26.07)

During a conversation about Black males, Kim acknowledged her concern for her middle school son. Kim questioned the influence of the world on him in opposition to the spiritual foundation that had been laid. Amber, Cheryl, and I addressed her noticeable distress by reminding her that God watched her child even when she could not:

Amber: This reminds me of the prodigal son – you don’t know if his ministry is birthed in him and [there’s] some things he’s just gonna have to go through.

Cheryl: You have to trust that you have done all that you could.

Charnita: My grandmother said that when we left the house she had to give it up to God and at a certain age, you have to deal with God on a totally different level because you are now accountable for yourself.
(TSG#7/4.23.07)

The Black church has historically played a pivotal role in the lives of African-Americans; however, the influence of the church has decreased, and Karen attributes this aspect to some of the ills that Black people are facing in society (which includes the way we view education): “When we were growing up, the church played a part...our pastors would talk about it [getting an education] from the pulpit. Now, even they’re afraid to address it, so we’ve lost everything basically” (TSG#7/4.23.07). She insisted that she will continue to pray because she believes that God is omnipotent and nothing in this world occurs without His knowledge.

Collegiality

The teachers expressed a need to talk to one another about curricular, personal, and other school-related issues. The participants had more in common than they realized, and some of them may not have spoken to one another (other than an occasional greeting) if they had not interacted in the teacher study group (RJ/4.16.07). Mandy, who appeared

to be introverted, liked the group because she was introduced to colleagues other than those assigned to her grade level:

I really enjoyed our study group. That was my first time being in a study group. I'm not quiet, but it takes me a while to warm up to people, ...it was a couple of teachers in there, and I speak to everybody and try to get along with everyone, but there were a couple of teachers in the study group that if I wasn't in the study group, I'd still be like, "Hey" and keep moving. But now I'll hold a conversation with them. (I2,296-301/6.19.07)

Mandy was newly assigned to our school, but the other teachers had been working in the same building for at least two years and discovered that they knew very little about one another. The teacher study group allowed the participants to reveal personal details about themselves that allowed their co-workers to understand how their personalities influenced their teaching:

You know what? I've learned so much from our study group. People that I didn't talk to in the building normally. ...some of the teachers – some teachers that I thought were really hard and not cruel, but very hard, I can see why they're that way because I didn't know about things that happened with them when they were being raised. I didn't know where they came from, so once you kinda figure out where they came from, it kinda helps you understand why they teach the way they do. And I can get some strategies from them that can help me out with some of my more...difficult children. But I've learned a lot from the teachers, I learned a lot about our building – about things that are going on that I didn't even know what was going on because I close my door and I'm thinking, "I didn't know all of this was going on," so it makes you more aware of your environment and I think that I got a lot of help – I think a lot of people did get a lot of help from the study group. (Tasha/I2,517-529/7.25.07)

Tasha mentioned being confined to her classroom and remaining unaware of situations that may be occurring in other teachers' classrooms. Other participants also made mention of this fact during their interviews. They found out that at one time or another all of them experienced the same problems, faced similar challenges in the classroom, and they were not alone:

...it's [teacher study group] a great learning experience. ...it really opened up our eyes to a whole lot of issues that, you know, people are dealing with because a lot of times you think it's just you going through something with a student or with a parent or whatever and once you put it all out on the table you realize it's an issue that everybody's struggling with a lot of times and you talk it over and see how you can work through it. (Tina/I2,121-126/6.27.07)

It [teacher study group] tends to allow teachers who maybe going through a lot stressful situations to open up and realize that you are not the only one. It's a good thing, and what I found myself doing is really looking forward to the next time that we could sit down and really open up and talk and really get to know one another. (Karen/I2,114-117/1.21.07)

...just by listening to the other teachers and I found out what was going on in my trailer it was going on in the other classrooms and I listened to them. And I mean I learned from them, I really did. (Mandy/I2,615-617/6.19.07)

I believe that if teachers believe not that they don't really have an outlet, but if they can talk to other teachers and be able to identify that somebody else is feeling the same way that they feel, then they don't feel as alone and then they're able to talk about it, collaborate, and come up with solutions. (Kim/I1,114-117/1.21.07)

For some of the participants, knowing that they were not alone in their experiences prompted them to listen and learn from other members of the group. Tina stated, "It's also helpful to know who our resources were, who we could go to, to get the ball rolling as far as getting help for each child" (FG/252-253/5.21.07). Other members of the teacher study group agreed that this professional learning opportunity facilitated their professional growth:

First and foremost, I think the most important thing that I've gotten from this group is we all need to come together and have what I would call a venting session. Open up because we don't half know what's going on. My coworkers didn't know I came home and cried [she shared this in the eighth study group], they didn't know how much what I am doing in the classroom is affecting me personally. And I think if we know that, we can better lean on each other and open up to each other because um...like I said, I stay in my classroom. I will go to my coworkers for you know, strategies and techniques and materials, but at the same time to just really open up and say, "Whew! I don't know what else to do for this child." So I

think that's the major thing that I've gotten out from it. We need to open up, we need to talk more... (Elle/I2,134-143/8.01.07)

I really got an opportunity to learn a lot from my colleagues – I learned a whole lot. I mean, I thought I was the only one who was basically crazy or losing it [her mind]. I learned a lot. I realize that we all [laugh], we all have some shortcomings, but I also realize...you know what? I work with some wonderful people who really love what they do and they love the children, and they're gonna do what's best for our children no matter, whether they have administrative support, parental support – they are going to do what's best for their children. (Karen/I2,200-206/8.23.07)

Because I saw that a lot of the problems my kids were having... And I was able to see what other teachers are doing, especially like from Holly and Kim [1st grade teachers] because I could see that some of my children are missing those basics [skills], so it helps me to understand... (Amber/FG,239-243/5.21.07)

...just learning a lot from other teachers too, which we don't get to interact with each other a lot, and I enjoyed that too because we were talking about how we're so much in our own little boxes and you really have no idea what the other person is doing and you don't really get a lot of opportunities to go and see what someone else is doing. And it's like you're able to steal strategies from other teachers too. (Holly/I2,430-434/6.26.07)

The study group was therapeutic for Elle and Holly who needed the hour as affirmation that they were “good teachers”:

Just this time [the teacher study group] today has helped me unwind. It wasn't a stressful day, we had a good day. Today was a good instructional day, but some days at the end of the day I'm just [motions with her hands to display that she's frantic]. I wish that we had more opportunities to sit and talk like this... (Elle/TSG#4/3.26.07)

You know, and even like the teacher study group I think it would be real beneficial for new teachers because you get in there and you find out, “Yeah, I'm not the only one going through this problem. Hey, there's other people who have students like me.” And then once you start talking about it, you feel better about it and then you also get strategies on how to deal with that too with that student. (Holly/I2,231-235/6.26.07)

Using the expertise of other teachers and learning from one another was one of the benefits that teachers associated with their participation in the teacher study group, but

the teachers also developed a different level of respect for one another as well. Respect was not only vital to the teachers' interactions with one another, but forming bonds was imperative to the teachers' work with African-American students.

Building Relationships

The teachers viewed themselves as bridges over trouble waters. They have extended themselves to provide transportation, food, and additional instructional assistance outside of the school day. I asked if teachers can become too consumed with their students' issues and Cheryl responded, "You cannot get too involved with your students...but when it comes down to education, you can't get too involved" (TSG#3/3/5/07). Amber recognized that teaching African-American students involves caring and doing things that may not be listed in a formal job description:

We've all taken kids home, keep extra food in our rooms. Everyone has a story of something that they're doing out of their way for a child. It's not in your contract, but they care about them. I saw Cheryl drive up the other morning with a car full of kids. Everybody's doing something they don't have to do – that's not in her job description. Her car doesn't say [district] County school bus. (TSG#4/3.26.07)

...I think it's necessary to relate to the kids. I think a lot of times teachers who teach on the south end of the county use it [culturally relevant pedagogy] more than on the north end and that's why some teachers and this may be biased or prejudiced or whatever, but I think like teachers on the north end – if some of our kids went up there, they really wouldn't know how to teach them because they really don't try to relate to them and to use you know where they come from [and] the things that they're dealing with to help them you know in the classroom. ...I think a lot of teachers on the south end *know* that in order to teach them...you've got to know about them and you have to relate whatever it is to get to them, you know. ...at the beginning of my teaching, I didn't understand why kids didn't have pencils, why they didn't have crayons, and why their homework wasn't done. That was a major problem for me and until I learned that this is what is going on at home. ...Now before school starts I'm buying up all the school supplies at Target and Wal-Mart and K-Mart so they can have those things. ...and just being able to relate to them and

when they feel like you care about them you can relate to them, they'll do anything for you. (Kim/I2,171-187/6.27.07)

Culturally relevant pedagogy demands that teachers care for their students. Establishing bonds within the classroom is important for the “family” to thrive (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Kim was unsure if her colleagues who worked on the north end of the district would be willing to make the sacrifices that Black teachers make for Black children. The participant loved their students and used tough love and *in loco parentis* (in the absence of parent) to make decisions that benefited the child:

When they [students] come in, they know that I love you, I care about you, but I'm serious about what you have to do in here, and I also relay that to my parents. When we have open house or whatever, I sit down and talk to them and I'm real with them, you know, and I tell them I need your help to get them to do X, Y, and Z, and if you don't I'm gonna have an attitude, I want you to know now, I'm gonna have an attitude because I feel like this is...as a people, all that we have is our education and from that, we can build on and become and do and get anything else. But I'm serious about their education. (Kim/I2,89-96/6.27.07)

First of all, I have to get to know my children – I have to build a relationship with them and the one thing I feel I do – I became like a parent. I tell them from the time they walk in my classroom...when they walk in, I become mom and dad and that gives me an opportunity to be able to touch them and reach them. (Karen/I2,98-101/8.23.07)

The teacher study group prompted teachers to analyze the manner in which they interacted and touched the lives of their students, and they had the following suggestions for all teachers of Black children:

I'm learning now with kids you have to build a relationship before you can really teach them, and I don't think that I thought that before. I thought that I teach, and they learn, but I'm seeing that you have to build a relationship with them for that to happen. (Amber/I2,446-448/7.2.07)

Get to know your students first. It's so important to me...to get to know your students, their interests, where they are because once you get to know the child...personally and for lack of a better word, professionally, then you can start educating them. (Holly/I2,202-205/6.26.07)

...I would let them [teachers of African-American students] know first of all get to know your students. Not just on a "I'm your teacher and you're the student, I'm right, you're wrong." Get to know them. And one way that I would definitely share that is to tell my colleagues, "Get out and like go to lunch, and when you go to lunch sit at the lunch table with them [students]. You don't have to do it every day, but sit and talk to 'em, you'll learn a lot from these kids. They'll start opening up more and more to you and when they feel like they can trust you with something, they'll come to you with *any* situation. They'll give it to you left and right." I think...from the study group one thing I would share is open up more, become a human with them, not *just* a teacher with them. (Cheryl/I2,135-143/8.22.07)

By the time that many of the first interviews were completed, the second teacher study group meeting occurred. I noticed that the teachers talked about the struggles that many of their students faced academically and emotionally, and this led me to ask the group, "When you know that your students have all of this other stuff going on [in their lives], how do you teach them?" The dialogue that transpired was detailed and passionate:

Amber: Sometimes you just have to put teaching on the back burner – I know that's what we come here to do, but if a child comes to school hungry or saw his mother get beat up, he's not learning anyway. He's not hearing anything that I have to say. That's why the first six weeks of school I spend a lot of time getting to know my children. I have a student who will never say that he doesn't understand, but I can look in his face and tell whether or not he's comprehending. I have another child who has to stay after school because he has a list of questions, but during school he says nothing. You have to first reach the child and sometimes you have to reach the parents.

Tasha: I think what makes my job a little easier for me is that I spend the first six weeks (of school) getting to know my parents because it helps making getting to know the child easier. I get every number for cousins, auntie, grandmother and they know me. I know who lost their job – I know who lost their house 'cause I have that relationship with them early on. I can't teach if I don't know what's going on with the child. And a lot of times they won't just come out and tell you. You have to know the child and be able to distinguish when something's gone down at home. You can look at the expression on their face and tell that something's going on. I have a child whose mother gave him up at six months old to go live with his grandparents. Okay, you know if he's living with older people, he's

not going to have any help at home with work. And this is a child who needs help. So I have to make adjustments on homework assignments, what I expect for him to do as far as projects, I have to allow him to use my computer. You know, you have to realize those things. You can't just send things home and say, "Go to the library, use the internet..." some parents don't have cars. You need to know that – they don't have vehicles, they don't have enough EBT [public assistance] to last until the end of the month and these are things that you need to know as a teacher. When I first started teaching, I was able to teach, but that has changed now.

Amber: You probably can go somewhere (other counties or even certain parts of this county) where you can just stand at the board and teach, but I want to teach *my* children and because of that it requires that extra. I work hard to build relationships with parents and we have a rapport now, but you have to work at that knowing that I care about your child.

Tasha: Our kids have seen so many things. They may not have seen Martin Luther King kinds of prejudices, but they've seen the insides of prisons – some have both parents incarcerated. What they have to deal with on a day-to-day basis and you're saying, "Get your mama to sign this." No one can sign anything and no one cares that something needs to be signed.

Elle: One thing that I do from the beginning is to set a family atmosphere and tone in my classroom. I let my students know that there's nothing they can't tell me or share with me. We are like brothers and sisters. We don't pick at each other, we don't talk about each other, and we don't allow anyone outside of the family to come and do those things to us. Sometimes we have those things and I ask, "Is this the way you want to treat your sister or brother? And they're like, "No." (TSG#2/2.26.07)

Forming relationships with students was another topic that dominated conversations during teacher study group sessions. Academics are important (improving student achievement is the mission of schools); however, the participants wanted all teachers of African-American students to know that forming personal relationships students is a prerequisite for teaching them and earning their respect. These bonds must be formed despite the administrative and curriculum mandates. Taking the time to get to know students may require teachers to diverge from pacing charts; however, these teachers were willing to take the risk.

Fighting the Status Quo

The participants felt comfortable enough with their skills and abilities as teachers to tailor the curriculum to meet their students' academic needs. Meeting student needs was not limited to including outside resources that would supplement the basal texts, but revamping the curriculum to include basic skills that the teachers were confident that the students must grasp prior to the time that skill was to be introduced:

Tasha: I followed the suggested curriculum map provided for the county for the first 12 weeks [of school], but after that, I had to do my own thing because the kids were missing important skills. They couldn't divide because we skipped all of that stuff because it wasn't on the curriculum map at that point.

Karen: I'm looking at what my children need and the curriculum map doesn't address that, and it's hard. (TSG#9/5/15/07)

Holly and Mandy talked about restructuring the curriculum and explicitly stated that lesson plans are written to appease administrators. Lesson plans are useless when the students either do not understand the concept being taught or their questions guide the instruction in another direction. Holly confessed, "I don't always go by lesson plans; I go by how my children are feeling. If they are not getting a lesson, I'll ditch the plans for that day" (TSG#9/5.15.07). In her second interview, Mandy had a similar admission, "Like I mentioned earlier, like we have these discussions in class [her classroom]...it wasn't anything on the lesson plan that we turned in for that week. We were just talking, you know, so..." (I2,607-609/6.19.07). Each participant responded affirmatively when I asked her if a gap existed between what she wanted to teach and what she was directed to teach (see Appendix I). I made some of the participants slightly uncomfortable when I asked them to what strategies they used in order to close the gap:

Well, I basically just do what I need to do [laughs]. So you can say I teach it anyway, but I do teach the performance standards, but I'm not going to say that I stop there. ...Because if it leads into something else, I'm gonna teach that. (Tasha/I2,494-496,500/7.25.07)

[I] close my door and teach what I want to teach [laughs]. Close my door and basically teach what I want to teach. ...well when we had QCCs [Quality Core Curriculum], I just...I'm speaking for first grade. There were too many objectives and too many things that they wanted a first grader to know from kindergarten to first. ...you had to plan some of that stuff, and I believe some of that stuff could have been introduced in kindergarten, some could have been introduced in second grade, kinda spread it out. ...I think more reading, you know, well actually reading and math, I have a problem with just teaching for exposure. I have a problem with that. Because if we're exposing, exposing, exposing, exposing every year when are they gone master it? You know, it's like you just cutting...you're just at the top, you're not getting down deep and dirty. (Kim/I2,427-440/6.27.07)

I tend to put my book down and try to reach the individual students. I tend to just put it [book] down, pray that I don't get caught, and do it [teach] the way that I feel like it should be done in order to have success – in order for my children to be successful. (Karen/I2,192-194/8.23.07)

...I also feel like as long as the topics and the standards are covered, it really shouldn't matter if you stay for this topic for six weeks and I know that's sad, you know, because then sometimes they're just not ready for it, so I kinda do, do that though even though it says on paper we need to move on if they're not getting it then what I'll do is I'll go back and look at the schedule and look at what's an easier concept to understand and I'll make sure on that, and then spend a little more time on something else that's harder. (Holly/I2,408-414/6.26.07)

Accountability has forced teachers to consider those skills that are necessary for their African-American students to perform successfully on the state's Criterion-Referenced Competency Test while preparing them for their adult lives. The teachers felt that they had to deviate from the mandated curriculum because important concepts were not covered or introduced too late in the school year. Although the curriculum was altered, the participants were willing to face any consequences or sanctions that resulted because their motive for "going against the grain" was to assist their students. These

mandates forced teachers to circumvent the system in order to teach our children using any means at their disposal.

During the first interview (see Appendix G) each participant was asked to identify topics that they felt should be discussed in a teacher study group. This question was included in order for me to make sure that their interests were a major part of the discussion. Table 3 displays the participants' initial topic choices for a discussion of the achievement of African-American students. As the data indicate, their preferred choices were addressed because they led the group sessions and guided the conversations in a manner that met their personal and professional needs. Group dynamics were also instrumental in influencing the nature of the conversations.

Administrative support, the plight of Black boys, parental involvement, curriculum mandates and unrealistic academic expectations, spirituality, collegiality, fighting the status quo, and building relationships are topics that emerged from the conversations that teachers had during the study group and during their individual and group interviews with me. I was particularly interested to know how the teachers transferred their knowledge of culturally relevant pedagogy discussed in the teacher study group to literacy instruction.

Impact of the Teacher Study Group

Participation Influencing Literacy and the Literacy Curriculum

Reading is such an integral part of learning; it is the only subject that can be integrated in every other subject that is taught. Infusing other texts into the prescribed curriculum would be easy because the standards are broad. The problem that the

Table 3

Participants' Initial Topic Choices for the Teacher Study Group

Participant	Topic Choice(s)
Tina	"Ways that we can improve our students' learning, ...getting students motivated to do the work, and ...preparing and ...returning homework on a daily basis" (I1,112-120/2.21.07).
Holly	"That's what I'm looking forward to just as far as the study group, just being able to find out information that fits our population of students. ...So I feel like with us we need to focus and I hate to say this, on character development" (I1,182-183, 202-203/2.1.07).
Amber	"...kinds of topics I think we should deal with that should be reading mainly, ...I think we should deal with how to reach children where they are. You have to kinda know a little of the lingo or their music or whatever, but you do have to be able to touch some personal part of their life to kinda bring them on in, you know" (I1,108-113/1.29.07).
Kim	"Strategies that work with our kids. ...How to communicate with our parents because although we are African-Americans as well, sometimes we don't come across right to our parents, so that makes it difficult for us to have, you know, a relationship with our parents" (I1,122-126/1.21.07).
Elle	"...we should discuss how we handle our developing females as teachers...'cause I think they're maturing a lot faster than the boys that come in my classroom" (I1,200-202/1.18.07).
Tasha	"...you need to get to know the teachers first and their different teaching styles. ... You would also be discussing parents because parents are a key" (I1,187-188, 193-194/1.26.07).
Mandy	"...ways that we can help one another. ...maybe we can share ideas or you know, to help be better in the classroom and to deal with certain things. ... how to get them motivated to learn. A lot of them come to school and they have never been motivated to learn" (I1,78-80, 90-91/2.23.07).
Cheryl	"...it should be geared towards something that we can do to better improve the education of students. ...We need to definitely get back in responsibility to build students to be more responsible" (I1,78-79, 85-86/1.29.07).
Karen	"Discipline...parental support you know, counseling, mentoring, ...I mean basically everything. I mean, how it is going in your classroom" (I1,143-144/1.18.07).

participants found with integrating culturally relevant pedagogy arose when unit assessments measured students' recall of facts from literature that corresponded with the basal series. Assessment scores were submitted to our district office; therefore, teachers had to use the classroom libraries provided by the publisher.

I noticed that the first four teacher study group sessions did not include any information concerning how the teachers were using their knowledge of culturally relevant pedagogy into classroom instruction. During the fifth study group the floor was yielded to me and I asked the participants directly, "How do you incorporate culturally-relevant pedagogy in your classroom in the area of literacy with our basal series, or can you?" Everyone spoke at once, and Amber shook her head. The majority of the teachers said that they had to pull their own resources. Kim and Amber discussed how they used the standards and their own knowledge to create culturally relevant lessons that involved literacy:

Kim: Based on the classroom and learning about their interests, things that they have dealt with or are dealing with. If a child is dealing with divorce, you can pull some literature on that. Or if you have a Spanish-speaking student, you would pull books on that culture to share with everyone as a show of respect for that person. You can use the literature and pull the standards [Georgia Performance Standards] out of that.

Amber: That's one thing that I like about the standards... "will draw meaning from text" [an actual standard] so you can select a text and you can guide them into the various meaning that you want them to get. So that's one thing that I like about the standards. They are broad enough that you can do a lot of different things. ...As long as you are meeting the standards, the stories are not as important as the standards. So sometimes you can pull in those things and talk to the children about it. (TSG#5/4.9.07)

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Amber was the most comfortable integrating culturally relevant teaching into her instruction at the end of the school year, whereas Kim and Holly have used this method of teaching as long as they had taught African-American students:

I had to begin to bring that [cultural relevant pedagogy] into reading. I had to go get the Character Ed. books that had reading with it, but I had to – the reading started to have more of a message. Toward the end of the year, I did have to move away from the text – I did a lot to keep up with the grade level, but I did have to move a lot away from that because I was beginning to see things and then I had to, I still needed to get that reading

in, but I had to get other messages to them. And I think we need other tools in place...I just did a whole different curriculum by the end of the year because my kids needed social skills, they needed to know how to respect boundaries and differences and things like that...(Amber/I2,328-336/7.2.07)

I use a lot of best practices which means that I use a lot storytelling, I use a lot of jokes, songs, a lot of movement, I put them into small groups, we do large groups, they do cooperative groups, they do partners. (Kim/I1,9-11/1.21.07)

It is BIG for me, and like I said, and that comes back from my experiences because growing up, it was the only people you knew about was Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, whereas with my children a lot of times when I read them stories, I'll read them stories that talk about African-Americans to give them their self-esteem, to give them their pride so that they'll know that there *are* African-Americans out there that have done successful things besides what you see on television. (Holly/I2,144-149/6.26.07)

The teacher study group started second semester and most teachers said that they would take the strategies that they learned and incorporate more culturally relevant texts that included the interests of their students, had Black children as main characters, and met the requirements of the standards. The participants stated that they felt more comfortable selecting texts as a result of their participation in the teacher study group.

Participation Influencing Pedagogy and Self-Efficacy

Amber was the most vocal in her praise for the teacher study group. She thought that the discussion enlightened her about her biases toward certain students that could be attributed to her lack of understanding of students whose home lives were dissimilar from hers as a child:

I was having a really bad day, and one day we met...there was this one little boy [and] he just seemed to be going backwards and I had never experienced that teaching... and I remember sharing that and I remember one of the teachers saying, "Maybe you need to start smaller...and work up to the big thing...just give him some other reasons and some other

ways to tackle the problem.” ...I really couldn’t see that and I don’t know if I would’ve without her pointing that out to me. I really don’t know if I could’ve, even though I started the [teaching] journal and it really, that journal helped me more than I can ever...’cause I hadn’t done that since student teaching...I just began to see so many things, so many weaknesses in me that I needed to make sure that I had overcome, so that my kids can be overcomers. But I realize that I have to help them to get there ‘cause you can’t see outside your box, I mean you just can’t, so you have to bring them out of that box and I realize now that that’s part of my job that I don’t think I knew before [the study group]. (Amber/12,218-244/7.2.07)

The participants possessed high efficacy, and they believed in themselves and their ability to teach children who may have social and emotional concerns that impact their desire to learn. Cheryl’s undergraduate experience equipped her for her career in education:

I went through a lot of training in undergrad. We had to do a lot of practicum experiences where we had to go out in the field and work with different grades, so I think I’m pretty much prepared. I had an excellent student teaching supervisor; she taught me a lot of the things I need to know as far as being prepared, you know, being ready for the students. (11,4-8/1.29.07)

Kim and Tasha had a different story. Kim entered teaching feeling overwhelmed because she realized that she was not comfortable teaching students how to read. Her commitment to teaching impelled her to approach her principal and ask for permission to attend workshops and conferences that were focused on the reading process. She also enrolled in graduate school and took courses that would also strengthen her skills in the area of literacy instruction. Tasha also looks to staff development and her ability to conduct research to find different approaches to teaching content areas that require reading comprehension:

...I thought I was prepared you know for teaching, you know, your first year, you think, “Oh, I’m ready,” but when I got into the classroom, I realized they really didn’t teach me how to teach the children to read. I was not prepared to teach those kids. ...I felt like I was doing them [students] an injustice. And for me, when I’m doing something, I have to

fully understand what I'm doing to transfer it or to switch it so that somebody else can understand, and I didn't know where to start to teach them how to read and that was a problem for me. You know, when my kids left me and they couldn't read and I didn't want them to fall into the same pattern that I fell into. ...So I went back to school, I took classes, I did staff development classes. When I went back to my get my master's I took more reading classes. Now I feel like when my kids come in that I'm equipped with what I need to teach them. (Kim/I2,114-117,125-130,153/6.27.07)

Okay, as a teacher...I've been teaching now for 11 years. In the beginning, I would say that I would be kinda nervous sometimes as a teacher with different – like science and social studies – I didn't feel like I was that knowledgeable about the information, but now I'm old enough and mature enough to know I need to read ahead of time [laughs] so that I will know the subject matter and some background and I know how to go research to go find out more in-depth information for the more challenging students. (Tasha/I1,4-11/1.26.07)

All of the participants agreed that they felt that they faced specific challenges in their classrooms (unmotivated students, behavior issues, uncooperative parents, etc.). The ideas that we shared as we examined students' work was helpful because some of them had exhausted all of their strategies for helping their students. One participant stated that she had a sister-circle who she could go to if she became overwhelmed because the other teacher study group members would not judge her or think that she was incompetent:

I have learned [as a result of the teacher study group] that I have not failed my students nor have I failed myself because there are times I really wonder... "Am I doing the best that I can do?" I now realize that I have not failed myself and I have not failed my students and you know, that's something we're all dealing with. (Karen/FG/5.21.07)

I just don't know what it's like to have to ask for school to help you provide food for your kids, it's just different things that, and I don't know if I would have ever known that, I would have known it, but don't think I would have appreciated it without the study group, and it has just like I said, it has really, that is why this is the first year I – I'm excited like I was my first year of teaching because I have so much to bring into this [upcoming school] year with me that I think is gonna help cut down on their [student] frustration 'cause I had a lot of students who, a lot of their behaviors – they were just frustrated, and I honestly I think that I was the cause of that because I just couldn't adjust my expectations, you know, it

was like, “If you do that for one, you got to do that for this one,” and now I see that that’s necessary because success even though this one’s success may be this, for this one, it may be up here, maybe this child can now read a 4.8, but this one 3rd grader, maybe now he can read a 1.8, but it’s still success for him and that’s what’s important and I just, I’m just excited because I just think it’s really going to change my teaching, just tremendously and I just can’t wait to watch it all unfold. (Amber/12,430-444/7.2.07)

...because a lot of times we’re stuck in our classrooms a lot and we don’t really have no idea of what’s going on around us, and I felt that our discussions a lot of good ideas came back [Kim affirmed by nodding her head] and I’m like, “Well let me go back and try this in my classroom.” And a lot of times we don’t get to do that as educators unless we actually taking classes, but even then, those situations are different because they may not necessarily be in the same type of classroom environment that you are in, too. (Holly/FG,28-34/5.21.07)

There’s no one solution...I think – I’ve just been looking for that one thing...if I just key in on whatever that one thing is, it’ll make it all better. And I’ve learned listening to Cheryl, and Tasha, Mandy, Elle, and all the different people of the group that, you just kinda try and see what works – what works for this student over here may not necessarily work for this student over there. I’ve learned that sometimes you may not reach everybody, but you just do what you can with what you have, and that’s all you can do. (Amber/FG,51-57/5.21.07)

As for me, I’ve become more varied. I try not to be the same with every child, and it’s – it’s helped me really a lot as a person – that’s one of the things that I put on that paper [evaluation of the teacher study group] because I’m learning to see outside...each child has a particular circumstance that has to be taken into consideration, and I truly have some students who are doing the best they can, and this study group has taught me that that has to be enough for right now. ‘Cause until certain situations, circumstances change, they really can’t give me any more than they’re giving me and I learned and this is helping me to learn patience and understanding I think more than anything else. (Amber/FG,137-144/5.21.07)

The influence of the teacher study group extended to the manner in which some of the participants viewed their students and their ability to assess their individual needs. Tina mentioned that “you can teach an old dog new tricks, and I’ve learned that I need to look at each child individually and treat them accordingly basically” (FG,150-151/5.21.07).

Amber also felt that she became more patient with her students as a result of the conversations that we had:

I've learned that you have to do what you do and know it's enough. You have to tell yourself it's okay. You need to take the successes where you can because they're all not going to be academic. (Amber/TSG#4/3/26/07)

Not putting them [other teachers] down, but it helps me to understand as a teacher where my expectations need to be. I guess from this study I've learned that I need – high expectations, but they need to be a little more individualized. (Amber/FG,241-244/5.21.07)

While waiting for the fifth teacher study group meeting to start, Kim shared that Tina mentioned the teacher study group in their graduate class and the impact that her colleagues were having on her teaching. I asked Kim specifically to tell me what she said because I was interested in knowing the influence that we were having on our veteran:

She said that she was getting a lot out of the meetings. She said that she found it interesting to see what her colleagues have to say about different things. Certain things that were said, she thought about it, and some things she's thinking about changing. (Kim/TSG#5/4.9.07)

High expectations of the students were coupled with the teachers' willingness to seek out help in areas in which they needed support. Strategies for implementation were transferred from the conversations of the group to classroom practice, and the teachers appreciated the opportunity to renew their spirits and their teaching methodologies. The participants were asked to design a curriculum for African-American students (see Appendix I), and the participants felt that incorporating activities that are more aesthetic in nature into the curriculum would encourage Black students to have an appreciation for education. Below are views of six of the nine participants:

...I would include a lot of our own people, especially with our reading. Like I said, I would really like to do – when I did teach language arts to middle school students, we always did novels, we did African-Americans, and they were always fascinated to know that our people write books. I

mean, some of them didn't know that, that they don't all bounce balls around or you know, make music, they write books...so I would do more to represent our culture so that they know that we do more than just entertain. (Amber/I2,275-281/7.2.07)

...they need exposure. I think field trips are great, but I think they need to be a little bit more meaningful for our African-American children...I'd say one thing, if you are gonna take them to the symphony, it has to include some Black people in it. I'll be honest with you. I went and saw (I think I was in eighth grade and I was in the band) a Black person playing the harp. And I had *NEVER* on t.v. or anything else seen that, and that made an impact on me to know that Black people listen to this kind of music, we also play this kind of music. ...you need to see African-Americans in these various roles that or these experiences, they have to be in it for us to understand it, for us to appreciate it....exposure and I think, this is what a curriculum is supposed to do – you know, it needs to include those kids' interests. (Elle/I2,197-210/8.1.07)

...So I would say more so in the kindergarten, first grade – in the stories they should see Black children of all different colors. But not only Black children, but either other cultures too, so not only will they have a sense of pride for themselves, but an appreciation for others because I think in our curriculum we don't do that. ...and then once they have pride and sense of self, then they'll feel that they can pretty much do anything. (Holly/I2,330-335/6.26.07)

...spend more time on reading and math. Instead of just calling it social studies, making it history, talking more or less about famous, Black African-Americans. Talking more about them because our children need to know that African-Americans have contributed *a lot*. A lot of our kids don't recognize that. I honestly think that we have to start with religion, putting our children in the mindset of...you know, meditating and you know, making them realize that they were actually created for a purpose – they're just not just *here* – they have a purpose in life. (Karen/I2,141-145,154-157/8.23.07)

It would include a lot of music. ...because a lot of our kids learn better through music, it would include a lot of hands-on [activities],...I would do the leveled reading definitely. ...I would try to do away with dittos, ...I know they need to be used because they take pencil, pen tests or whatever. ...it would be hands-on, it would be print-rich. ...it would be a lot of music, a lot of cooking, a lot of science experiments, a lot of field trips because a lot of our kids are not exposed to a lot of things so they don't have that background knowledge to build upon, and I think going out on field trips and doing things give them that background knowledge. (Kim/I2,385-393/6.27.07)

I think counseling sessions are very important. I would basically, necessarily have the counseling session in rotation because students, they don't have anywhere to talk. They have to be quiet all the time, they have to be quiet in the classroom, they have to be quiet in the lunchroom. I mean, they can talk to a certain extent, but they can't really, they have no discussion time. We don't have any down time in the classroom because you have to go from thing to the next; you don't have time to hear about, "Well, what happened at home last night?" (Tasha/I2,375-381/7.25.07)

The participants named infusing African-American literature throughout the curriculum; exposing the students to meaningful field trips; using music; and meeting the students' affective needs as techniques that would add richness to learning while simultaneously instilling pride and self-esteem.

The Teacher Study Group as Professional Learning

The overall sentiment of the courses offered through our district's staff development department was unfavorable. According to the participants, professional development designed by the district assumes that the courses are of interest and importance to everyone:

My momma always said, "If I can't say nothing nice..." [laughs] "don't say nothing at all." Well, I really honestly believe that...the county sugarcoats things and they really...the classes or staff development that they offer really doesn't get to the heart of the problems per se. (Kim/I1,86-89/1.21.07)

Our district utilizes the train-the-trainer model in which the district provides one or two members with training and these persons "redeliver" using a verbatim script to the school staff. Every school, regardless of the demographic make-up of the students are expected to perform in the same manner:

...some of them [staff development courses] have been mandatory, and some of them I have chose on my own. To me, a lot of times with the mandatory ones depending on which setting that you're in, will depend on which ones you're required to go to and a lot of times it's almost like a

blanket statement, “Well, since we’re working on standards, let’s just give you professional development on standards,” instead of looking at each individual classroom because not all teachers have the same needs. So to me, if you’re going to do professional development, then you need to ask the individual teachers, “What are the needs in your specific classroom?” and then get those teachers with similar needs together instead of just doing, okay well we’re doing standards so this is how standards should be taught for everyone and it doesn’t work that way. (Holly/I1,145-155/2.1.07)

...I think with our district, because we’re kinda in this one size fits all [mode], most professional development is...a lot of it is like fitting this one student. In that we don’t necessarily have – a lot of it is not realistic – it’s not really helpful. (Amber/I1,74-76/1.22.07)

The participants believed that the district assumes that all children and adults learn the same way. Professional development, according to the participants, was narrow-minded and doesn’t leave any room for interpretation or modification for the types of students that they taught. Becoming actively involved in the teacher study group alerted the participants that staff development course offerings excluded the nature and needs of African-American students or culturally relevant pedagogy:

...I think that the school district should look closely at the research that’s out there as far as teachers who educate African-American children and put in place different resources such as in-services, staff development classes to better help teachers or equip them with the necessary skills that they need to teach these kids. (Kim/I1,57-60/1.21.07)

I think we need more workshops of this kind [teacher study group], and I think we need a more realistic approach to we’re trying to do, you know? ...we get this handout that says “best practices,” but we have to consider what the best practices really are for African-American children...you go to the studies that the research – footnotes – sometimes we get those best practices. Who are these best practices for if you go to those studies? Are they African-American children? Are they children – even if they are not African-American, that kinda mirror our kids? (Amber/I2,254-255,259-266/7.2.07)

Even with staff development, they need more in terms of training...things need to be a little more balanced you know what I mean?...We need more training in cultural relevance in terms of the long term because really

we're setting up our children for failure because that's not real life.
(Amber/FG,401-402,405-407/5.21.07)

Tina exclaimed that she viewed herself as a lifelong learner and has the same expectations from her students whereas traditional staff development did not give her that same feeling "It's [learning] continuous, on-going, every day!" (Tina/FG,583/5.21.07).

Tina also stated that professional development provided by the county does not deal with issues that are pertinent to the school:

...they just need to get people who've been out there in the field of teaching who've experienced some of the things we're experiencing, gone through some of the problems we've gone through, and who can give us some...help, realistic help instead of pulling something off of the internet and coming out and dishing it out. Be real. (FG,424-427/5.21.07)

Traditional staff development, unlike the teacher study group, is usually not interactive and considerate of the audience's need to have questions answered once the training has been completed:

Just realizing that I am not the only one that's going through trying to find out "What can I do to become a better teacher or to best help that child?" That's the main thing, just continue with the study group. (Karen/FG,380-382/5.21.07)

...to me, they [district staff development office] just haven't been helpful because there was no follow-up and that was a problem for me once we had that first in-service be it on the math book or on the reading book, then I had to go in my classroom and really learn it on my own because I could say with the math, the textbooks we've got now...I went to that in-service – I don't remember a thing. And so and then to come from it [training] realizing that we may not have textbooks and we do have textbooks and they were not there for me to see a student textbook, what am I going to be working with...I feel at a loss. ...I personally need some follow-up. Can I get some follow-up, some feedback or whatever? So, I don't know... (Elle/11,163-171/1.18.07)

Karen and Mandy stated that staff development is necessary, but the current structure of staff development is devoid of strategies that they can use in the classroom:

By offering more in-services that are going to be meaningful, not just coming up with something, but making it more meaningful. Something that I can truly use within my classroom. And I know you've heard me say best practices...you know there's a lot of teachers out there who do certain things in their classroom you know, if we're allowed to just see those different things. (Karen/I2/131-135/8.23.07)

I know everyone's tired of staff development, but have it on something that we are *actually* doing. Not just some stuff that, you know, I know some workshops we just [laughs] you know, a repeat of some things that we don't really need. So just some workshops or staff development, you know, that actually shows us something we're doing every single day. (Mandy/I2,382-386/6.19.07)

The most salient feature of the African-American teacher study group was the manner in which the participants looked to others as competent peers who were able to teach them strategies and techniques that may have been foreign to them. Once they returned to their classrooms and tried the suggestions of their colleagues, they returned to the next session to share their successes. Elle stated that this factor was missing from traditional staff development. The teachers wanted to continue with the study group during the upcoming year because of the interactive nature of the sessions and the topics centered on them and their students.

Administrator's Participation in the Teacher Study Group

Principals and assistant principals are often seen as superiors to faculty and staff members. I, like Cheryl, believe that I am a teacher at heart, and I wanted the participants to become comfortable in the teacher study group setting to reveal their innermost thoughts in my presence. Eventually, the teachers felt that they were able to trust me and I valued their opinions. We established a relationship of our own that included honesty and trust, and I was also forthcoming about my feelings about them as professionals. Cheryl did not let me know that she was initially apprehensive about my role in the group

until her last interview, but she had an opportunity to learn about me and her perception(s) shifted:

Cheryl:...I think it was good that you were there because it wasn't like you were coming at us as an administrator or anything, you came us like a keep it real person. And how you came at me is how I come at my students. You let me see a different side of the AP [assistant principal] Ms. West, it was...Ms. West came in it was like, "I'm stripped of all of this, my name is..."

Charnita: Charnita

Cheryl: Charnita [we both laugh]. At first I was like, "Man, I'm not gonna say much," but once that was stripped, everybody started stripping away... So I think that helped a lot you know, I didn't feel like, "Man, I can't say this to her 'cause she'll go back and tell." (I2,280-293/8.22.07)

I always took the time to answer school-related questions, and one meeting was devoted to answering questions about actual scenarios involving testing such as procedures for a child who would miss the majority of the CRCT because of surgery and a fifth-grade student (a critical testing grade for promotion) who was suspended during the test (TSG#6/4.16.07). Amber commented that her experience in another school system conditioned her to think that administrators were unapproachable for help concerning strategies that she could try in the classroom:

I guess that's what I like and will take from this experience [the teacher study group] forever is like when you can come through here and look at Tasha and she'll say, "It's not a good day." "No, it's not," and that's just from these groups. Even with you when you say, "This is not working, can you tell me something that I can try?" As a teacher, never ask the AP or administrator. (Amber/FG,496-500/5.21.07)

The teachers reported that my participation in the study group helped them to see the issues of school globally, and as future leaders, understand the challenges that they may face when they are assigned to this position. I also found that I had to reassure them that they were "leaders among leaders," and I took the time to acknowledge their individual

contributions to the overall school program. The teachers stated that they appreciated this type of support from a member of the administrative team because they needed to know that their efforts were noticed and appreciated.

Before the teacher study group started, I asked the participants to predict how they would feel about my participation (see Appendix G), and Holly looked forward to the contributions that I could make:

Well, as a leader to me, being in the administrative role puts a different perspective on things, and I know that just from the experience that I've had that you see a lot more things than a teacher would, so to me I feel like you as a leader will be able to bring in more experiences of what other teachers are doing or not necessarily other teachers, but also other schools and do kind of a comparison. ...because as teachers a lot of times you get caught up in your own little box and it's like what you think, well I'm right but not necessarily so, that's one thing I'm looking forward to is just you bringing your expertise in. (I1,241-248/2.1.07)

As a result of our relationship, Tina and Kim asked me to be their mentor supervisor for their leadership class experience. They cited that they felt more comfortable with asking me because I seemed genuinely concerned about their personal and professional goals because of our interactions during the study group. Elle and Tasha also felt that I was interested in their lives both inside and outside of school:

I think not only being able to come to you as far as what's going on within our school, and with our children, but personally. I know I've heard a lot of administrators – you can't approach them. That's it! You need to be approachable. First and foremost, if you're approachable, I can come to you and ask you anything that's going on with me. Personally, professionally...I think that's a major key – you've got to be approachable. (Elle/I2,186-190/8.1.07)

I appreciate you asking me to be in the study group 'cause that was an honor in itself because everyone wanted to know, "How did y'all get in the study group? Y'all must be smart." [laughs] No, but...I – I'm just glad you asked me to be in the study group because I'm also working on my doctoral [degree] and I maybe at this point sometime, and this kinda helped me to see how you lead into it and I liked the way you sent out

questionnaires and you know, and all the things we had to do to prepare for it, and signing it and making it all official. You told us about how you had to get permission and everything and this will really, really help me a lot and so when I get to that point, I hope that I use some of the same strategies that you used...with yours [research process]. (Tasha/I2,574-582/7.25.07)

Karen sensed that I understood the challenges that they faced in their classrooms and the teacher study group gave them a chance to vent to someone who cared, “I enjoyed this [teacher study group]; I’m excited, and I’m looking forward to doing it again soon! I believe that you felt what we were feeling, and thank you” (I2,226-227/8.23.07). Elle expressed her gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the group and she viewed me as the facilitator who would not accept “I don’t know” as a valid response to my questions:

First and foremost, thank you for having this study group ‘cause it never came in my mind...it was something that I think all of us knew we needed, but never voiced it. We just went about our daily grind, but it was a welcome diversion from just everything that was going on this year. It really was. You were a very good facilitator, you know how to get it out of us [laughs]. You’ve been a great guide in terms of making us think about the questions we had and never asked anybody. (I2,362-367/8.1.07)

The focus group gave the participants an open forum to tell me how they felt about my participation and the following discussion occurred:

Amber: You see the other side. Sometimes you know, one thing as a teacher, you just see what’s happening in your classroom and I think when you bring in an administrator you get to see the other side [Karen nods]. You know, like one thing in here, one thing I’ve always liked about this study group is when I’m reading I’m like, “Okay, let me go back [flips through *Dreamkeepers*] because I know somebody’s gonna play devil’s advocate so let me look at the other side to see...” that kind of thing so when you bring in an administrator you can see – it gives you more of a view of everything that’s going on and all the players that are involved, you know....

Elle: I think that it depends on the administrator. You have to be open-minded for one and be willing to receive that.

Amber: That's true.

Elle: Otherwise, it's gonna bounce right off of them. They will feel and believe what they want regardless of...what we say. (FG,594-606/5.21.07)

My goal was for the participants to see that their ideas were not "bouncing off" of me and suggestions that they had were pertinent to our school. Certain concerns that the teachers had were rephrased and mentioned to our principal. Therefore, changes in our school operation will be inevitable because the improved collegial relationships between the participants and me.

CHAPTER 6

A BRAND NEW DAY

There I was, Dorothy, a shy Harlem kindergarten teacher, caught in a swirling blizzard, the chaos of my inner mind, and dropped into a scary wonderland. I have only my precious little dog Toto for a companion, and I must follow the yellow brick road to get home. Every step of the way is chock-full of metaphor, and the final message is positive and encouraging. It's about searching for something and then finding you've had it all along.

-Diana Ross, Dorothy in *The Wiz*

During our 2007 annual leadership conference, our county superintendent introduced his vision for stakeholders. Using the theme, “No More Excuses,” he challenged school leaders to continue our efforts to make student achievement our top priority. He also stated that zip codes and other information based on demographics should not be an indicator of school success; every student should receive quality instruction from high quality teachers regardless of who they are and where they live because children are not responsible for selecting the attendance areas in which they reside (RJ/6.30.07). In other words, our superintendent proposed a brand new day in our district where no longer would excuses be acceptable and school leaders were responsible for echoing this sentiment throughout their respective buildings.

In order to negotiate with The Wiz, Dorothy, Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion had to face Evillene, the Wicked Witch of the West. Evillene enslaved a large group of heinous creatures in a sweatshop with deplorable working conditions. After the main

characters banded together to defeat her, the sweatshop workers began to shed their hideous costumes to reveal people whose beauty had been concealed because of Evillene's jealousy. As the characters danced and sang *A Brand New Day* (Vandross, 1972), their garments of oppression immediately combusted and they were finally able to experience freedom of their bodies and minds. The teacher study group attempted to liberate the participants in a similar fashion. For one hour (or often more) twice per month, the teachers in the study group were able to discard their worries about curriculum, documentation, deadlines, and so on in order to exchange ideas and strategies about issues and topics of interest to them. As each meeting occurred, I was conscious of the questions that guided the study.

Data for this naturalistic inquiry were collected with the following questions in mind: (1) What are the characteristics of an African-American teacher study group? (2) What are the topics and themes discussed in an African-American teacher study group that is focused on "culturally relevant pedagogy"? (3) How does participation in a teacher study group inform the participants' views about (a) literacy and the literacy curriculum and (b) their teaching practices? (4) According to the study group participants, how does the African-American teacher study group compare to other professional development experiences in facilitating their growth as learners? (5) How might the participation of a school administrator in a teacher study group assist teachers in their professional growth?

The Research Questions Revisited

Characteristics of the Group

We were a group of sisters who came together to be intellectually stimulated by the wisdom of each other. Our circle included a very experienced 18-year veteran who sat

quietly until she felt compelled to speak. When she would raise her hand, we knew that she was prepared to bring clarity to a source of confusion or offer a practical suggestion. The youngest member of our group was probably quoted most often in this document. She would render us speechless as she addressed school-related issues as accurately as someone who has been teaching as long as she had been alive. This group was honest enough with themselves and other members of the group to seek help when needed; encouraged one another both inside and outside of the group; code switched between AAVE and academic English when necessary; gave silent and verbal affirmations of agreement; and talked into the early evenings as a group of Black sisters do when they lose track of time. Our conversations were respectful of our school and district although legitimate concerns surfaced throughout the study. Basically we stated the facts and talked until we were satisfied that we addressed the issues. *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* was used as a tool to start discussions that either addressed teaching pedagogy or other topics of interest.

Themes

The study was conducted without the benefit of prior studies that may have given me an indication of the topics and themes that might be discussed. The participants wanted facilitative leaders who were willing to listen to their ideas. The struggle of Black males consumed several conversations, and I wondered if Black males were a “problem” for these teachers because they were female and could not relate to the young Black males’ experiences because of our gender difference. I also wanted to know if other races of teachers were present, would that particular group feel that all Black children (male and female) were challenging to teach because they could not relate to their Blackness?

Another topic discussed involved the lack of parental involvement in our school. Parents are asked to complete ten volunteer hours per academic year; however, only about 5% of parents are active in the school (including PTA). Even if parents are unable to come to the school to volunteer during the school day, the participants wished they would reinforce skills and work with their children at home. The greatest displeasure with our profession became apparent during our discussions of *No Child Left Behind* and federal, state, and local expectations for student performance. Faith and spirituality played an important role in the participants' lives because all of them felt that they were "called to teach." Only three of the participants attended college aspiring to become teachers; the remainder of us came to education as a second career. The participants also appreciated their ability to leave their isolated classrooms and unite their efforts for the improvement of our students and themselves. Improving pedagogy involved the participants supplementing basal texts and manipulating the curriculum in order to meet the needs of their students. At first they seemed a little hesitant about sharing this detail, but once trust was established they were willing to share any aspects of their teaching that may assist one of their colleagues. Building relationships with students and parents was the final topic discussed, and teachers formed kinships with their students because they recognized the struggle of our people and felt that they were obligated to the next generation. Caring for students seems to be indicative to specific cultures:

I was speaking to one of my friends, who's Asian – her thing is that her kids are going to go to school until they're 18 and they have to go into the military. They have to give back to this country that has afforded them the opportunities that they've had – they *must* do that. But they go to school just to learn. Our [African-American] kids really need somebody to care about them. I asked her, "Do you think [names child] teacher cares about him?" She said, "I don't really know, but it doesn't really matter. She has to teach and he *has* to learn." (Amber/FG,888-896/5.21.07)

The participants were determined to care about their students because they believed that for some students, a teacher's touch may have been the only sign of affection that they received each day.

Literacy and the Literacy Curriculum

The teachers had high self-efficacy and felt that they were very knowledgeable in teaching reading and using the county-issued resources in order to implement the curriculum. They did have a problem with their attempts to teach the students at their instructional level when standards and objectives outlined for the student's particular grade level resulted in instruction occurring at his/her frustration level. This was particularly true for language arts instruction because reading impacts all of the other subjects. The majority of the teachers transferred their love of and success in reading to their students, and their literacy experiences as children have influenced their teaching. They felt that fostering a love for reading at a young age has lifelong implications for our students and literacy instruction has become a priority in their classrooms.

Teaching Practice

"We need no more analyses of the African-American child. We need to renovate the system that teaches error. We have the tools to do the job. Do we have the will?" (Hilliard, 2002, p. 102). I closed the first teacher study group with this quote which issued an ultimatum to the participants (RJ/1.29.07). I wanted to know whether or not they were ready to share with one another how they navigated within an educational structure that was not created with African-American teachers or students in mind. The purpose of schools and teaching is to educate our young people. In this age of accountability, the purpose of schooling seems to have shifted to meeting state standards.

These teachers voiced very strong concerns for African-American students and have found that they have had to (at times) deviate from the mandated curriculum in favor of activities that were more suitable for their students' intellectual and emotional well-being. As a school leader who trusted each participant's decisions regarding pedagogy, I was not alarmed by their confessions. If certain teachers had been involved in the group, I may have questioned why the curriculum was not been followed as directed, but each of these teachers had a command of *teaching*, and I did not have a right to interfere with their recipe for success. If test scores measure teaching (which they do not), these participants were the best teachers in the building. When the school's spring 2007 Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) scores were delivered to the building, we found that Elle's third-grade students and Tasha's fourth-grade students performed as well or better than all of the other classes in the building. Amber's classroom was comprised with mostly with non-readers and low-leveled readers (her preference) and 86% of her students passed the third-grade reading portion of the test. Holly, Kim, Tina, Cheryl, Karen's students consistently perform well and this year was not different. The only teacher that I was slightly concerned about was Mandy because she was adjusting to a new curriculum and teaching a critical grade. Like the others, Mandy's students performed at acceptable levels as well. Entrusting competent teachers to take risks in their teaching resulted in an improvement in student performance, even if that increase was not measured by standardized and/or criterion-referenced assessments.

Comparison of the Teacher Study Group and Other Professional Development

Professional learning must be tailored to meet the needs of each school. Many times, professional development courses are structured without consideration for schools

with diverse learners or without research that supports adult learning. The “one size fits most” method should not be used when teaching children and is also inappropriate when teaching adults as well. Participants liked the amount of interaction that was involved in the teacher study group, and they commented that they enjoyed learning from their colleagues. More traditional forms of staff development, according to the participants, usually involved someone actively teaching and their involvement is limited to sitting and trying desperately to pay attention. The participants stressed that they would like to participate in a study group again.

Administrator’s Participation in the Teacher Study Group

The participants stated that the teacher study group gave them an opportunity build a relationship with me (FG/5.21.07), and because of the teacher study group, I felt closer to them. They were able to see leadership from a more holistic perspective, and ask questions about certain school decisions that were made. Sometimes they had tunnel vision, but I tried to help them visualize entire concepts and see how one decision can positively or negatively affect the entire school community. During this process, their dreams became my dreams, their joys became my joys, their frustration became my frustration. Their voices became my voice and with their permission, I spoke loudly, boldly, and intelligently at administrators’ meetings and to anyone who would give me a few minutes of their time. The research question was designed to chronicle the teachers’ professional growth, but I grew as an instructional leader through my interactions with them. One participant stated that she would not have participated if any other administrator led the group.

The experiences of the participants were congruent with data that show that female administrators spend more time in the classroom than their male counterparts (Shakeshaft, 1987). The participants in this study were prospective leaders with an average of 10.33 years of experience as classroom teachers. The criteria for participating in this study limited the participation of new teachers because most colleges and universities require educational leadership students to have at least three years of classroom experience. Setting criteria for participation provided me with a group of veteran teachers who have a wealth of teaching experiences throughout the nation. The learning that took place in the study group, coupled with the participants' coursework at their respective graduate schools, proved that learning is attainable when adults are placed in an environment that respects them, "life-long learning has a whole new meaning" (Amber/FG/5.21.07). Each of them admitted that this was the first time that they had participated in a forum such as the teacher study group; therefore, I asked them about their perceptions of my influence on the group.

As the initial facilitator of the teacher study group, I led the first two sessions in order to give the participants an example of how to lead a group of adult learners. (The first teacher study group was dedicated to signing consent forms and giving the teachers an overview of the study.) My intention was for the teachers to take ownership of the group by volunteering to read and lead the discussion on subsequent chapters; however, the focus group revealed that each of them (I asked every person) mainly viewed me as the facilitator of the group:

...your role to me was mainly as a mediator kinda, not a mediator, but a facilitator. You just facilitated and guided...you did not show any biases, you did not come in as "the" administrator...you came in as a part that just wanted to hear ideas from teachers, you know. I took it as you came in to

get information that could help you get information as a leader or administrator in that position. (Cheryl/FG,444-448/5.21.07)

...facilitator, you helped guide the group. You allowed us to be open, but definitely a facilitator. (Karen/FG,484-485/5.21.07)

I would say to give us guidance (Holly/FG,480/5.21.07).

Amber agreed with her colleagues in defining my role as that of a facilitator, but she also felt as that I assumed additional roles of a teacher and counselor:

Also as the teacher. When you came in here for the groups, you didn't seem like the administrator...[Karen nodded]. Like one of the teachers who understands what it's like dealing with difficult children. You remember what it feels like to be in a class with difficult children and really try to reach them. Also as a counselor. I need you to tell me what are some things that I can try so that I don't...lose my job basically...You know what I mean? And, and I didn't feel judged by that – I didn't feel like, "Oh what did I just say?" ...You don't want nobody to judge you and feel like you're saying you don't like the child you know, today is just not the day. (Amber/FG,491-502/5.21.07)

I intended for the participants to view each other as facilitators of the individual meetings; however, I noticed that they continued to look to me for guidance because of my leadership position within the school. The participants sought help from one another on pedagogical issues and collaborated within the confines of the group as well as outside of the group. My influence on the group, according to the participants, facilitated open, meaningful, and powerful discussions about themselves and their students as they collaborated in my research. Their conversations revealed two topics that enriched the study and needed further support from the literature – White privilege and educating Black males.

A Second Glance

White Privilege

During the focus group, Amber and Holly had a dialogue about the disparities between the north end of the district (which is known to be more affluent) and the south end (which is known to be more impoverished). Holly explained a discussion that occurred in a graduate course:

...we were in class on Saturday and we were talking about...grouping students according to race as far as far as attendance zones and people were saying how [our district] used to be a particular color in one area then it went to another color. So we got into this big discussion (of course it is a mixed class) about why is that now that at one point [our district] on this end was White and that was Black and one person was trying to explain the change. Why it changed was because once we [Blacks] moved in, other people [Whites] moved out. So, it got into a big discussion where the White people in the class were trying to say – like justifying it – they didn't really understand what we were trying to explain; like there's a reason why minority to majority existed [a busing program that transported minority students from the south end to more affluent schools in the north end] and they were like so...like they really couldn't understand it because it got to the point in the discussion where everybody [who] was Black in the class was like, "You know what? You're not understanding where we're coming from, so let's not have this discussion anymore." (FG,110-124/5/21/07)

Frustration is usually an end product when Blacks feel that Whites attempt to rationalize embedded racism. We do not hold every White person accountable for a system that perpetuates racist ideals; we would like for "others" to acknowledge that our struggle for equality continues today. The participants were aware that White privilege exists in education as they discussed the disparities between the northern and southern areas of the district in terms of access to educational, financial, and human resources. They named increased parental involvement, fewer behavior issues, high student achievement, and access to additional resources to improve teaching and learning as the positive

characteristics of northern district schools (TSG#7/4.23.07). As the topic subtly appeared in subsequent conversations, I asked them if they were familiar with the term *White privilege*. I discovered that the teachers felt its effects without knowing that an actual term existed that contextualized the inequality.

White privilege explains methods in which members of the racial majority are afforded certain benefits that “others” who are non-White are not. McIntosh (1990) describes White privilege as an “invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day” (p. 1). Fine (1997) suggests that school and work juxtaposes Black and White in order for a comparison to be made that associates “whiteness” with traits that symbolize “quality, merit, and advantage” (p. 58) while “Blackness” indicates a “deficit or lack” (p. 58). Institutionalized racism is perpetuated by school and work, and no one should be surprised that many Black students are not successful in organizations that perpetuate their demise (Fine, 1997). Powell (1997) concurs with the research that White privilege plays a role in the underachievement of Black students and urban schools are “dumping grounds” for those who are viewed as deficient.

The participants and I talked at length about our envy of the academic readiness of “north end” students. We strongly felt that students from more affluent families possess the necessary skills that are required to meet or exceed the mandates of educational policies prior to their entry into school. Teachers of marginalized students find ourselves teaching basic literacy and numeracy skills throughout their matriculation through elementary school, and we are afraid that many of our students will continue to be left behind (FG/5.21.01). Sloat, Beswick, and Willms (2007) assert that children who possess low literacy levels at the end of third grade will most likely become adults who

are functionally illiterate. The authors conclude that the preponderance of educational research has shown that these students also have a negative self concept, display negative behavior, require academic support, and are limited in their career choices.

The participants were also concerned about low levels of literacy of our students and their parents. Tina stated that if she could devise a curriculum for African-American students it would “stick to the basics ‘cause that seems like that’s what we’re missing ‘cause we move the kids on from one grade to the next and they don’t have a strong, solid foundation to build on” (I2,161-163/6.27.07). When I asked her to define the “basics” she named literacy skills “...just the sight words, using the dictionary, vocabulary, just learn how to listen to a story and share a story, writing skills, those type things” (I2,167-168/6.27.07). If the curriculum is designed in a manner that is detrimental to students who do not possess prerequisite skills that gives “others” who possess these skills an advantage, then teachers (Black and White) must become leaders for change and challenge the status quo of the organization called school that is structured for them to be unsuccessful.

Educating Black Males

The research on the underachievement of Black males in academic settings continues to provide dismal statistics, “Young Black males rank highest among students who choose to leave school; are suspended, expelled, or kicked out of school; score poorly on tests; have low GPAs and high rates of referral and placement in special education” (Whiting, 2006, p. 222). The status of our Black male students remained a conversation topic throughout the study. The conversations of the participants echoed the work of Kunjufu (1995) whose premise is that in order to teach the Black male, one must

love him, understand him, and respect him. He also urges teachers to be honest about their personal feelings toward teaching a group of students who have a history of failure in school. The participants had very strong views concerning the plight of the African-American male. When I asked Amber to design a curriculum for Black students, her attention shifted to her boys who aspire to become athletes or entertainers. She believed that if our students were engaged more with critical thinking experiences in classroom settings, maybe her Black, male students would understand that their career choices are not limited and they would become better decision-makers:

...we need more experiences with African-American thinkers, more philosophers like when you ask children, like most of my boys if I ask them what they want to be, they want to be rappers or musicians or ball players. We need more where they can see where you can make it with your mind. That you can think beyond and dream beyond where you are. And that, to me, is one of the hardest messages to get across to my students because they really don't understand that. And I don't know, I'm still trying to decide if it's age they don't understand because they're too young or do their minds really not conceive that there is life – there is wealth that can be made with using your mind that you don't have to...I'm not saying there's anything wrong with those careers, but I'm saying there other things you can do and be successful at them. (Amber/I1,221-230/1.22.07)

Kunjufu (1995) states that teachers' expectations of Black males greatly influence the manner in which they are educated. He poses the following questions to educators, "When you teach Black boys, what do you see? A future engineer, doctor, accountant? Or do you see a drug dealer? Whatever you see will be what you produce" (p. 94). The members of the teacher study group saw the potential of their Black, male students; however, they struggled to penetrate through the barricades of negative self-concept in order to teach them. We talked about building relationships with African-American male students, but we discovered that we were only able to identify with their plight on one

level – our shared ethnicity. The teachers could relate to the young men about their feelings of being Black in America and some of the challenges that they faced, but their knowledge of being a Black *male* in America came from second hand accounts from other people, and they could only imagine the demands and pressure that was placed on them at home and school.

Kunjufu (1995) has identified seven areas that will assist teachers in creating a relevant curriculum for African-American males, but four will be discussed here. First, he suggests that Black males have a short attention span which limits the amount of time that they remain focused during lectures and individual tasks. Incorporating more hands-on projects and learning centers will keep the Black male's attention and reduce the number of discipline issues in the classroom. Next, he warns educators about the manner in which we speak to Black males, including embarrassing them in front of their peers. Peer relationships are very important and powerful, and teachers who understand this will also be aware that their primary goal when they are around their friends is acceptance and belonging. When Black males feel that they are not respected, they will retaliate by becoming defiant and disrespectful. White teachers sometimes have a more problems in this area than their African-American counterparts:

...I've had this conversation with a Caucasian teacher at our school. And she was having a lot of problems with this one African-American male and I tried to tell her on the standpoint that our coach [who is also White] has the same problem. The way *you* see us talking to them, you can't speak to them that way because you're the minority. They don't see you a lot, so they think that you're gonna talk down to them anyway, so they're going to be on the defense when you say anything to them because we're [laughs] you know, we had slavery, we had this, and some of them – that's all they've heard in the past about Caucasians is what they did to us in the past and they don't understand it anyway, but all they know is negative coming from Whites to Blacks. So you can't speak to them the way we speak to them... You've got to gain their trust before you try to discipline

them in that format or start chastising them. You got to gain their trust, and they have to respect you, you have to respect them. And they have to *know* that you respect them. Just telling them to show me respect or I'm the adult in the classroom...if that child doesn't see that you are the adult, you're *never* going to get any respect. (Tasha/I2,259-273/7.25.07)

Other members of the teacher study group nodded as Tasha recounted this story and stated they have also intervened when their colleagues (Black and White) were “out of order” and chastised their Black, male students in front of an audience of adults and peers. Kunjufu (1995) reiterates Ladson-Billings (1994) and suggests that teachers use an interdisciplinary approach to teaching that incorporates literature that depicts the cultural experiences of Black people. The last strategy that will be discussed within the context of the study of the teacher study group involves the egos of African-American males. Kunjufu (1995) claims that White male dominance in society and the lack of Black male role models results in young Black males becoming confused about appropriate ways to express themselves. Members of the teacher study group talked about the challenge that some young men had in accepting authority in school due to their positional power at home. Teachers should capitalize on their Black males' natural leadership abilities and assign them roles within the classroom that will allow them to demonstrate their leadership.

The participants were very concerned about Black males as a whole, and Kim even expressed her frustration with her middle school son. She was not sure if outside factors (peers, music, educators, etc.) had more influence on him at this point in his life than she did. She tearfully expressed that she could only hope and pray that she had properly prepared him for life because the decisions that he made as a young man would impact his future. Members of the group had to provide comfort for our hurting sister,

reassure her that she was an excellent mother, and remind her that God watched her son when she could not (TSG#7/4.23.07). Kim's concern proves that the plight of the Black male is a pervasive problem for the entire race, not just one that is confined to our students with low socioeconomic status. Until the educational system is restructured to provide teachers with realistic strategies for relating to our Black male students, their performance will continue to decline.

Dispelling Myths

Society is inundated with negative perceptions of African-American children, and as a result, incorrect generalizations have been made that affect the entire race. Instead of operating purely from a deficit theory, the members of the teacher study group also examined the strengths of our boys and girls. Hope for a better future for African-American students is what gave the participants the energy to teach (Graves, 2001), but they understood that all of their colleagues in education do not share this sentiment. The selected readings and personal experiences provided a framework for engaging and meaningful conversations between and among the participants.

Sensing that the participants were soldiers in a war with an enemy that took shelter in bureaucracy and accountability, I wanted them to use the teacher study group to counterattack any overt or covert maneuvers of their nemesis. During the second interview (see Appendix I), each participant had the opportunity to share what they felt all educators should know about teaching African-American children. Their passionate responses ranged from loving the children to loving the teaching profession. They also felt very strongly about Hilliard's (2002) and Ladson-Billings' (1994) research that dispels the myth that Black students are inferior to Whites. Amber, who read the seminal

text twice [once during the research period and again with her mother (who is also an educator) before the second interview] spoke with conviction about Black students' academic aptitude when she replied:

At this point...I would like for most educators, *all* educators to know that African-American children, they're not incomplete, they're not dumb, they can do, they can excel, they can succeed, and they can think. And they don't all come to school hungry, they don't all come to school in need of love and attention, that they are smart people, and they, believe it or not, all of us are not illiterate and there are those of us who can read and write and add and subtract on grade level, and that yes, we may need something extra, but we're not stupid. (I2,164-170/7.2.07)

Karen felt that a love for teaching should make teachers of African-American students willing to be surrogates for parents when necessary:

One, you have to *love* what you do. You have to *love* what you do. That's the number one thing. LOVE what you do and be willing to stand in the gap, and when I say stand in the gap, not just be the educator, the teacher, but put yourself in the place of the parent. Put yourself in the place of a parent, *love* what you do. (I2,114-117/8.23.07)

Tina suggested that African-American students need love and they may also need additional support in the classroom to compensate when support from home is unrealistic.

Mandy also believed that African-American students need understanding teachers:

That they have...a great need for nurturing because it's not always given at home. Sometimes they need the love and care and the support. The homework thing, where they don't have a lot of support at home, try to give them the support in the classroom. If they don't have their homework assignments completed, don't question why, don't get too deep into it, just make time for them to have it done in the classroom and during other times throughout the day when they can fit it in. (Tina/I2,110-116/6.27.07)

Our kids don't go to school as prepared as some of those children. And so they expect for them to be on the same level where a lot of our kids, sometimes they don't pick up a book or you know a pencil or something until they get to school. So and then they [teachers] turn around and be extra hard on them. (Mandy/I2,279-283/6.19.07)

I asked Mandy if she thought that teachers needed to have patience with African-American children, and she agreed that teachers of African-American children should be very understanding when they lack certain prerequisite skills. The importance of having a positive rapport with African-American students can not be overemphasized. Cheryl reflected upon her childhood experiences as a reminder of each child's potential and she forms long-lasting relationships inside and outside of the classroom regardless of parental involvement:

It's really that they're no different than teaching any other culture. You know, it is the fact – when I say that, I mean just because you see the student who might not have what student A has or what student B has or whatever 'cause you can tell as a person – you can go physically go look and tell the type of home life or situation that a child is in or their situation. You can tell if the mom is one of the more thugged out moms who you know, really [doesn't] care, [mom's attitude is] just go do your homework or don't do it. You can really tell, so I think that it is really important to get to know them. I2,148-154/8.22.07)

Students who are discipline problems may have issues unrelated to school that may manifest in the classroom. Kim warned teachers of African-American students to investigate the reason(s) why students may act out prior to making a discipline or counseling referral. Many times an underlying issue that may be totally unrelated to school has surfaced. She also wants teachers to know that African-American students

...have potential. That sometimes when they come to school and misbehave, there's something behind that, you know that be real slow to try to put them in special ed. You know, find out what the real, real problem is. ...don't judge them time they walk into the classroom. (I2,208-211/6.27.07)

African-American students' abilities are often overshadowed if they have chronic behavior issues. The Georgia Department of Education has asked educators to be very careful when making referrals for special education testing because the state has a very

high number of Black males who are assigned the emotional/behavior disorder (EBD) label. Regardless of the circumstances that the participants have to face each day, they come to work knowing that they may lose battles (being forced to administer numerous formative and summative assessments, completing enormous amounts of documentation, attending countless meetings, etc.) during the school year, but they are determined to collectively win the war on helping their students succeed academically.

From “Ain’t I A Woman?” to Phenomenal Woman

Feminist theory (particularly Black feminist theory) greatly influenced the manner in which I collected data and interpreted the results of this study. Collins (2000) and Dixson (2006) suggest that data collection should be structured in a manner which immerses the researcher in the community under investigation, challenges traditional methods, and is examined through a lens that leads to the empowerment of Black women. As I transcribed the interviews and teacher study group sessions, I was attuned to any aspect of teaching and learning that the participants implicitly or explicitly stated were racially contrived or exclusionary because of gender. Those pieces of data were noted in my researcher’s journal along with the meaning that I derived from the information. I refrained from using generalizations about women; however, similar responses from the participants were reported as common threads of the data. Women’s epistemologies were also considered when I wrote the results because I could fully identify with the participants as an African-American female myself.

Black feminist thought began as Truth posed the most important question concerning society’s views of black women during the 19th century, and this question is still appropriate in some cases today. The participants, in their different shades of brown,

were Black and proud and never lost sight of the fact that they were women – phenomenal women (Angelou, 1994) – whose coming together allowed them to ease on down roads of their own, critically analyzing various facets of schooling both locally and in broader contexts. These facets included school leadership, the demands imposed by educational reform, and themselves as teachers and learners. The participants and I used the teacher study group as a vehicle to collectively voice our renewed commitment to educating African-American students by reclaiming our authority as educators who understand that there are unjust educational policies that exist but will not tolerate discrimination in any form.

An Argument for Culturally Relevant Professional Development

The implementation of teacher study groups is not foreign to the field of education as a form of improving teaching and learning in America's schools (see Chapter 2). I employed similar methods used by other researchers examining teacher study groups in my study; however, the mere fact that the participants in the current study were African-American, female teacher-leaders resulted in findings that were unique when compared to previous studies on the same subject. Existing literature on teacher study groups reveals a focus on improving instruction in a particular academic area (technology, mathematics, reading, etc.) whereas the nine teachers in this investigation used *Dreamkeepers* (Ladson-Billings, 1994) to critically examine themselves and a myriad of educative practices to aid in their professional growth. Although one of my research questions addressed the impact of the teacher study group on the participants' use of literacy and the literacy curriculum, the strategies discussed had the potential to transfer to other curricular subjects as well as meet students' affective needs through

relationship building. Using the teacher study group as a reflective tool is one of the salient features of what I have termed *culturally relevant professional development* (CRPD).

I created the term *culturally relevant professional development* (CRPD) as a method of teacher education and professional learning that is sensitive to educators' needs as adult learners and concurrently respects them as professionals. In order for CRPD to be an effective component of professional learning and development for educators, facilitators who use this process will need to apply the five-point star model of CRPD (see Figure 3) in order to be effective: (1) the organization and structure of the activity must address the needs of the participants; (2) trust must be established from the onset; (3) the topics discussed by the group must be inclusive of various cultural groups that may or may not differ from one's own; (4) the use of informal language and dialect should be viewed as acceptable forms of communication; and (5) participants must be committed to the goals of the professional learning activities. Although my study included the use of non-verbal gesturing and call and response (the latter can be directly attributed to the African-American community), the procedures outlined below should be present in every learning experience that is considered to be a form of culturally relevant professional development.

CRPD activities should be organized in a manner that encourages the participants to return for subsequent sessions. The African-American teacher study group was voluntary, but I stressed the potential impact of this study on the educational community and the opportunities for personal growth. Arrangements were made with the district's Professional Development Department for the participants to receive one Professional

Learning Unit or PLU (teachers must complete ten PLUs every five years to renew their teaching certificates), but other aspects of the group had to be enticing to them since they were enrolled in graduate school and did not need additional credit. Snacks were available for each meeting and when meeting dates coincided with conference night and/or PTA meetings, dinner was provided for the participants and their child(ren). Being able to fellowship with food gave us opportunities to share recipes and encouraged personal conversations. (We usually ate meals after taping was completed because no one wanted to be viewed with food in her mouth.) The demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D) substituted as an interest inventory that allowed me to learn more about each participant's personal and professional life. I was able to use this information to ask about their different activities outside of school and unobtrusively delve into their personal lives.

When planning CRPD activities, participants should be allowed to be actively involved in as much of the planning as possible. For example, I asked one of the participants if we could use her room for the first teacher study group meeting because of its large size, but the participants asked her to host the remainder of the meetings because the room was located in the back of the school and had less traffic than other areas of the building. They appreciated the privacy that this room provided and even when the teacher was not present for meetings, she gave me permission to use my key and set up the room prior to the start of the study group session.

Another important aspect of planning CRPD activities involves allowing the participants to develop the meeting schedule. The first teacher study group meeting was also used for us to jointly coordinate our meeting dates with our personal calendars and

the school calendar. We then decided how we would read the landmark text. Although *Dreamkeepers* (Ladson-Billings, 1994) was selected and purchased for them, I asked them to peruse the book and make suggestions for reading the entire text over the next five months. (I realized that the teachers also had to prepare for teaching and graduate school responsibilities.) The participants decided that reading the chapters in chronological order was most logical due to the manner in which the book was structured. They also committed to facilitating the discussion for at least one of the chapters. After that first meeting, I typed the schedule (see Appendix E) and sent this information in an e-mail to the participants and our Principal. Allowing the participants to share in the ownership in the initial stages of planning gave them the shared responsibility of deciding what was to be discussed and learned and created bonds that allowed us to trust one another.

Establishing trust in a CRPD activity includes members being honest with themselves through their willingness to face their own biases and prejudices, and “be[ing] the change that they want to see.” CRPD requires the creation of a safe space where the participants can speak freely, critique educational practices, and ask questions without being belittled by the actions or words of group members or others outside of the group. Discussing confidentiality initially is critical to establishing trust in the group. Members must be assured that their innermost thoughts and feelings (especially personal accounts and critiques of policy) will remain within the confines of the group unless consent is given to speak about these issues to non-participants. A facilitator should expect that the participants will be reluctant to share their true feelings until they feel comfortable with

other members of the group, and he/she may want to share a personal story to open the floor for discussion.

The purpose of CRPD is for teachers to be able to discuss topics related to our profession that will increase their self-efficacy and improve student achievement. CRPD should not only occur in a non-threatening, relaxed setting, but the use of informal language and dialect should be viewed as acceptable forms of communication within the professional learning activity as well. The participants in the African-American teacher study group concentrated more on the topics of discussion rather than using formal registers when speaking. Freedom of speech and a shared language allowed the teachers to express themselves with a type of straightforwardness that Standard English would not convey. As ideas, suggestions, frustrations were expressed and questions were asked, the participants could respond in a like manner that implicitly told their colleagues that our common bond created by our ethnicity was evident in our beliefs about our Black students and in our speech. The use of colloquialisms, slang, regional dialect, and any other speech pattern that deviated from Standard English were not perceived as ignorant, but viewed as a language style that enriched our conversations. The setting invited us to lapse into more casual codes that provided comfort, support, and validated us as Black women who have a distinct way of communicating. In the case of the African-American teacher study group, African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) became a tool of empowerment that demonstrated that our home language was revered in the midst of a group who were considered educated by society's standards.

CRPD necessitates that topics related to cultures that may differ from those involved in the activity be discussed, and these cultures must be respected. The African-

American teachers respected our Blackness, but they also showed admiration for the European-American teacher who was profiled in *Dreamkeepers* (Ladson-Billings, 1994). As the participants used critical reflection as a tool for improving pedagogical practices and themselves as practitioners, they were willing to commit time to achieving the goals of the activity by attending all sessions and preparing for each meeting by completing the required readings and/or assignments. Culturally relevant pedagogy is not outlined in teaching manuals; therefore, CRPD is a change agent that addresses methodology that includes culturally relevant materials. Learning how to select and use appropriate materials forced some teachers in the teacher study group to restructure their manner of teaching regardless of their years of teaching experience, which satisfied one of the goals of CRPD.

A common thread that links the characteristics of CRPD is commitment. Each participant must be dedicated to the goals of the learning activity and committed to assisting their colleagues in their professional growth. I asked the participants to commit their time and talents to discover what would happen when a group of African-American women educators discussed a text that promoted education for Black students. Their willingness to embark on this journey with me required enormous amounts of commitment and trust. Information could not be gathered unless participants attending the meetings and were prepared to discuss and share the readings. The text prompted conversations that were directly related to classroom instruction and those that centered on other topics that were of interest to the participants. CRPD entails that participants be willing to assist others in their professional growth. The participants used their journals (which I also provided) to record their questions and thoughts so that they could receive

feedback from their colleagues. Supporting one another extended beyond the teacher study group. After the sharing work session (TSG #7), teachers were observed sharing materials, ideas, and strategies during their planning time, lunch, and after school. The teachers remained fervent about the group from the beginning until the study concluded, and the teachers felt obligated to making sure that other members of the group were successful inside and outside of the classroom. In addition to the five-point star model outlined above, the participants in the African-American teacher study group also named leadership and culturally relevant pedagogy as crucial components of CRPD.

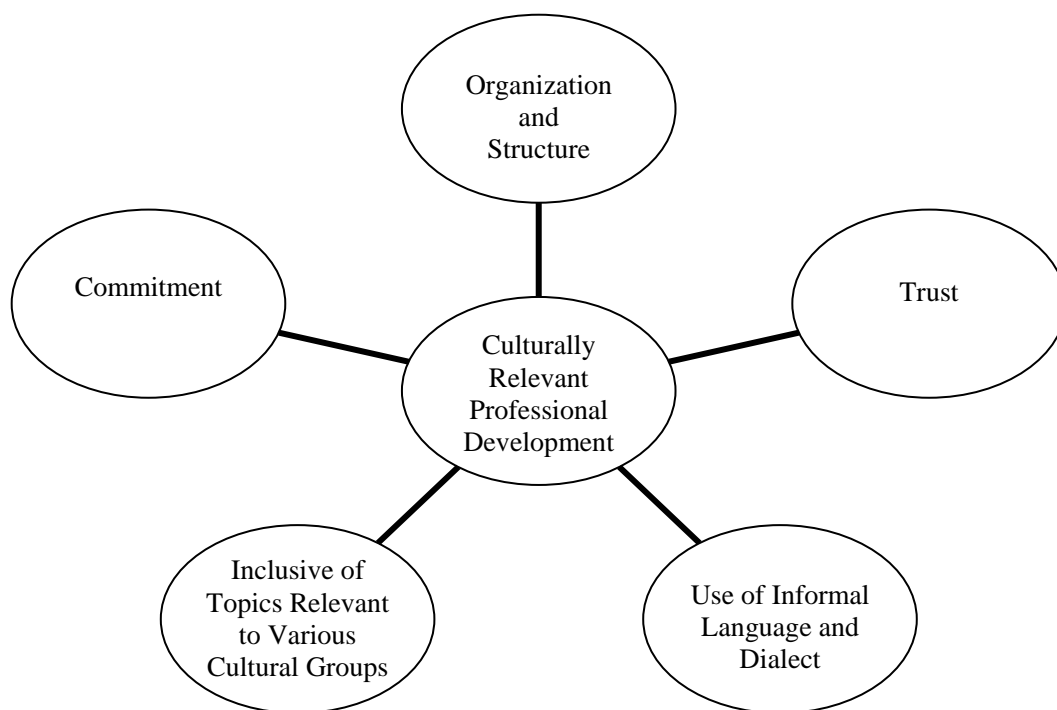


Figure 3. Five-point star model of culturally relevant professional development.

Leadership

All of the participants surveyed felt that professional development should be designed in a manner that meets the needs of the teachers and students who are

teaching and learning in that respective building. I chose to design and implement a teacher study group that used a text that was applicable to that set of educators. The cultural relevance of the study group became apparent as we discussed strategies for improving educative practices for those subgroups (low socioeconomic status and Black males) who consistently underperformed on formative, criterion-referenced, and standardized assessments. As an administrator at the school, I had immediate access to school-wide data that the participants would need to request; therefore, the teacher study group had data-driven components. After reviewing CRCT results from the 2005-2006 school year, I asked the participants, “These are the numbers, this is who’s struggling, what are we going to do about it?” (TSG#2/2.26.07). Our conversations from that point forward centered on how our pedagogy should prepare our students to become successful, literate adults who are prepared for life. As with any other professional learning activity, school leaders must take the helm and work closely with teachers.

According to Southworth (2002), instructional leadership is central to successful school leadership. Blase and Blase (1998) feel that instructional leadership combines supervision, staff development, and curriculum development. They also emphasize that “promoting teachers’ professional development was the most influential instructional leadership practice at both elementary and high school levels” (p. 11). The implementation of the African-American teacher study group is supported by Southworth’s (2002) leadership research that outlines quality professional development as that which encourages professional dialogue and collaboration among teachers and administrators; provides opportunities for joint examination of student data; and gives teachers the opportunity to see that the administrator is a “continuing professional

learner” (p. 86). The design of the study is also substantiated by Blase and Blase (1998) who add that effective instructional leadership also promotes teachers’ professional growth and fosters teacher reflection (participant journals). Finally, Tatum (1997) justifies the necessity of the homogeneous composition of the group by race: “even mature adults sometimes need to connect with someone who looks like them and who shares the same experiences” (p. 88). The following excerpts are from two of the participants who shared that the teacher study group (which was culturally relevant) helped them in their professional growth:

Once I got into it, I enjoyed it. The teacher study group was *wonderful*. I – I mean it was, I perceived it as a learning tool, a learning environment where people go in and express their thoughts. I personally think that if it continues to go on, it would be excellent because slowly you know, it takes one. If this is something that you can take into different schools, and I mean like a staff development type of thing – go into different schools and just discuss some of the things and then get them to branch off and start doing something. Start training so many schools in [the district] just go round, go round, go round eventually it’ll catch on like wildfire, it’ll catch on. I think *that* is the big thing. I really perceived it [the teacher study group] as being a learning tool.
(Cheryl/I2,272-281/8.22.07)

... I’ve learned a lot, you know about myself and I don’t like speaking a whole lot outside – with the kids I’m fine because that’s my comfort zone, but I’m opening up a little bit more and voicing my opinions about things where in the past, I’ve always been a better listener than a talker. I can hear you and relate to what you’re saying, but I don’t have a lot to say out basically, so it’s gotten better. Thanks to you. (Tina/I2,238-243/6.27.07)

As instructional leaders of the school, professional growth is our responsibility and we must be actively involved in ensuring that adult learning occurs and is valued. Culturally relevant professional development is not limited to the formation of a book study, but can include any learning activity that is structured in a manner that promotes pluralism and

allows the participants to incorporate an appreciation of cultures (that may or may not be different from their own) into classroom instruction.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Southworth (2002) also asserts that teachers should have input in curriculum design. Each state has outlined what should be taught; however, our state's performance standards are broad in a sense and allow some flexibility in teaching within the content areas of reading/English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

Incorporating a culturally relevant curriculum, according to the participants, is possible; however professional development is necessary in order to ensure that all teachers, regardless of their ethnicity, are aware of strategies that promote cultural appreciation.

I had numerous opportunities to observe these teachers engage their students in meaningful dialogue and concrete learning experiences, and I realized that their suggestions for improving the curriculum for Black students were implemented in their classrooms. The teachers understood what Black children needed, but they would like to see these practices implemented consistently on a global scale. The underachievement of African-American students has been linked to classroom practices that are often devoid of respect for their culture (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2000; Lynn et al., 2006). The teachers in the study group felt that all Black students can be academically successful if the curriculum (and teachers implementing the curriculum) showed respect for their language, potential, and other cultural values and characteristics that they might bring into the classroom. I would challenge other educators to incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy into classroom instruction that will remind African-American students that they are the descendants of kings and queens every day of the school year. Recognizing our

rich heritage is inadequate when this honor is reserved only for Black History Month celebrations and programs.

Suggestions for Further Research

Although other studies that investigated culturally relevant professional development is absent from the research literature, two areas need more attention from the educational community. First, as the assistant principal and primary investigator, I wanted to include findings that addressed my role(s) in the overall operation of the school. My logic was if I was leading a professional learning experience, I should include background information that addressed my role as an instructional leader. Not only was the research on the assistant principal inadequate, the literature that *was* available failed to recognize my impact on teaching, learning, and leadership. Southworth (2002) states that all of the empirical data on leadership has focused on principals, particularly in elementary schools and looking at the impact of assistant principals and other school leaders on instruction have been either overlooked or not deemed important. The majority the search results on the assistant principal defined my position as assistant principal as “limited” (Cranston, Tromans, & Reugebrink, 2004, p. 228) and suggested that my primary duties were discipline, completing clerical tasks, and entertaining parent and teacher concerns (Cranston et al., 2004; Richard, 2000). The duties described above are a *minor* portion of my day. My official title is Assistant Principal for Instruction, and my résumé attests that I am a former classroom teacher who has taught every grade level in the elementary school (K-5). Based on the responses of the participants in the study, I am more than a manager, and my experience in the field of education is respected:

I think you have a lot to offer...and I'm interested to know...you're coming from your experience as a teacher, as an administrator how you

feel – even going through your dissertation...the research that you've found that worked or what other teachers have said worked. (Kim/I1,148-151/1.21.07)

Instructional leadership is the responsibility of all leaders in the building. The principal is ultimately responsible for all aspects of the school; however, the importance of the assistant principal should be a topic for further review and inquiry.

I would also propose that additional research on African-American teacher study groups be conducted. The educational community would greatly benefit from studies that focus on the conversations of Black teachers. Teachers have a lot to say about education, but feel that their voices are silenced by policy and protocol that expects for them to “stay in their place” and let those with certain titles and positions to remain the authority of who should be educated and what resources should be made available. Foster's (1997) *Black Teachers on Teaching* is a powerful example of how Black teachers felt about themselves and their role in education. Other studies that allow African-American teachers to speak freely and honestly about their perceptions of education may help colleges of education and school districts prepare a cadre of Black teachers (who are grossly underrepresented in teacher education programs) who are clear on the expectations of teaching and remain in the profession.

As more African-American teacher study groups are implemented in schools, we should look closely at the data to determine whether or not topics that emerge are consistent across the groups. Looking at the similarities and differences among groups would provide the field of education with insight into whether or not certain topics are indicative to a particular school or district or if certain topics affect educators on a much broader scale. One discussion that often divided the group was the involving others in the

teacher study group. My question to the group was, “Do you think that you would have felt different if...it [the group] was racially mixed? Do you think that you would have had some of the same conversations?” (FG/5.21.07). The transcription for this question was seven pages long because everyone had a response:

I probably would have been more careful in what I would have said. I wouldn't have been as open...We're all the same race and we may have similar backgrounds, and we seem to understand our culture.
(Mandy/FG,73-74,78-79/5.21.07)

I was going to say the same thing as Mandy. I don't think I would have been [Amber shakes her head]. I think some of us, well I wouldn't have been *as* open, but I think the discussion would have taken – some people would have gotten offended [Amber nods her head]...By some things that maybe we would have said...I think some people would have been offended like she [Mandy] said by us being the same race and coming from the same background we kinda understand – we were able to relate and say, “Ah, okay, I can feel that.” So no one was really offended by it – the things that were said. (Kim/FG,83-86,90-93/5.21.07)

African-American teachers felt they could talk about certain situations and express themselves openly in a manner that they cannot when members of other races are present, but in order for all teachers to meet the academic needs of Black students, dialogue must be extended across racial lines.

My suggestion for future research would be to focus on topics and themes of a racially mixed group of educators who also read *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. When I posed the question concerning having a diverse group of teachers involved in the group my role shifted from researcher to devil's advocate. I wanted the group to consider if they were promoting a different form of institutional racism by using this group to segregate themselves from colleagues who did not share their ethnicity. As people who have always been excluded from educative practices and been victims of White privilege, I wanted to know if African-Americans

had the right to practice exclusion when we know that the effects can be detrimental.

Cheryl did not respond to my question concerning exclusion until the end of the focus group. She felt that teachers who represent other cultures should be included future study groups because they needed assistance with relating to their students and their colleagues. Her point was made explicably clear with the following statement made by one of our White faculty members: Jane approached Cheryl one day and told her, “You know, I was afraid of you because you are a Black woman from [named Cheryl’s hometown].” We were left virtually speechless, and while we were looking dazed and confused, Cheryl continued:

...not only would it be beneficial for them for children, they need to know how to approach grown people or adults so to speak. ‘Cause I know me, I’ll pop off [get sarcastic] real quick. So I think the group will be beneficial...with a focus on not only African-American students, but African-American teachers too...the Caucasian people need to be involved too. (FG,863-865,878-880/5.21.07)

When someone else was finally able to speak, the following dialogue ensued:

Amber: Do you think the setting would have worked, though? That’s what I think about ‘cause some of the things we could just talk about... I agree, I think that we need to do something to help Caucasian teachers because there is a barrier there, and if you can’t get over that barrier, you can’t really reach them [Black students]. And one of the things that I’m seeing with our children is that’s important. So I don’t really know if we bring – when we bring in other cultures into the group, like this type of setting where you can just discuss what’s going on because I can communicate with you, no matter how you express it to me, I’m gonna get it because when two African-American teachers speak, there is a dialogue – a spoken dialogue [Elle and Karen nod in agreement] that allows us to roll with the conversation. And I guess – I just don’t see that happenin’ when you bring in...

Charnita: In mixed company.

Amber: [nods] in mixed company – in this type of setting. I’m not talking about you know, like the poverty [Ruby Payne in-service we had], where

you can go to the different stations and dialogue, that kind of forum, but when we come together like this...I mean, I don't know.

Cheryl: I think, I think...when we're coming together like this – this particular book, I-I don't know if I'm being clear. This book [Dreamkeepers] in this setting was good for this. I mean, but you have to, I guess, find a commonality with them as well...

Karen: Right.

Cheryl: ...Like you said, you have a different book [Amber referenced her interest in reading Delpit and Dowdy's (2002) *The Skin that We Speak*]. And please understand what I'm saying. This group is perfect for this book, this topic. (FG,888-917/5.21.07)

The participants did not see their segregation as exclusion – they felt that education is structured in a manner that is beneficial for those who created it, and the group gave them a place where they could collaboratively plan to help their students “give them [policymakers and boards of education] what they want” (Tina/FG,174-175/5.21.07). They did, however, understand that educators must be united in their efforts to improve teaching and learning for African-American students, and I believe that future research should explore the conversations that teachers have when they are involved in this type of professional development.

Implications of the Study

This study revealed that we, as concerned educators, must actively seek effective means for improving teaching and learning for teachers and students. My findings have strong implications for those who are in charge of professional development, researchers examining urban schools, educational leaders, and state and federal departments of education.

Teachers must be involved in professional learning activities that are relevant to their needs, respects them as professionals, and considers the nature and needs of adult

learning. The principal of our school does an excellent job of assessing areas for growth in teachers and allowing them to select the professional learning activities of their choice. If she is unable to secure trainers for certain initiatives, she will send groups of teachers to conferences and allow them to train the faculty and staff. Members of the teacher study group felt that our principal and leadership team did an outstanding job in providing appropriate staff development at the school level, but were disappointed at the district's position that every school needs the same offerings:

I think that the professional development that we're getting here...our principal is allowing us to form book clubs, which is actually a good thing once I think about it because our book clubs are now meeting the needs of our particular students and not necessarily of the county. Because the first book that we read...we discussed how to meet the needs of challenging students, which is, we kinda seem to have a lot of that here. And to me, it was more beneficial than the county coming in and saying, "Okay, here's your professional development." So, that's one thing that I like about this school is that our professional development more so catered when our principal does it to the needs of her staff and not necessarily the county. (Holly/I1,160-169/2.1.07)

Kim also expressed her dissatisfaction at the manner in which the district chose to transition the teachers from our former state-wide curriculum to our new curriculum:

...I guess my biggest thing now is the standards. When Georgia implemented the standards, I really don't feel like the county really trained the teachers (or us) as far as how to implement the standards and be successful. ...they did a watered-down version, but at the same time, they held us accountable and expected us to...score a certain score on the CRCT when they really didn't prepare us. (I1,205-210/1.21.07)

The participants also felt that the district could be more supportive of their professional growth by adopting textbooks that are accurate and inclusive of diverse cultures. Once these textbooks are adopted, teachers need opportunities to speak with publishers and/or their representatives to learn the most effective means for using the texts during classroom instruction.

Classroom instruction is important in every school setting, but teachers who are assigned to urban schools especially must have a firm grasp of the curriculum as well as be able to contend with societal issues that appear in the classroom. Teachers (like the teachers in the study group) who are assigned to schools that are either located in urban areas or those that have urban characteristics must have high efficacious beliefs because Lynn et al. (2006) assert that understanding the nature of urban schooling involves recognizing that political and economic systems influence student achievement. Anyon (1997) agrees that “urban and social reform are symbiotic” (p. 167). Amber, the philosopher of the group, indicated as much when I asked her how the district could support her work with African-American students (see Appendix G):

...I think that we need to understand our African-American community. In our community, we have a lot of issues that plague us and that schools are not these isolated utopias. If this is mainly happening to African-American students – if mainly our children are the ones coming from single family homes, our children are the ones who most of their fathers (if they know them at all) are in prisons, if it’s mainly our children who are impoverished, then we have to consider that those issues come to school with them. And it doesn’t seem like we do that. (I1,52-58/1.22.07)

I asked the participants to identify those aspects of teaching and learning give them the greatest satisfaction (see Appendix G) and everyone said, “When the light bulb goes off.” We must make urban classrooms conducive to the manner that African-American students learn in order for their learning to be illuminated. Teachers want to see their students succeed because we take our jobs personally and correlate student performance to our ability. We need to provide the electrical circuits to make those light bulbs go off, and this includes creating a network among parents, teachers, district offices, state departments of education, and federal education offices.

The prospective leaders who comprised the teacher study group had distinct beliefs about the types of leadership that they would like to see in schools. Supportive administrators were discussed in the teacher study group sessions as well in the interviews (see Appendices G and I). According to the participants, leaders should model best practices for classroom instruction for teachers; work with small groups in the classroom; look for positive occurrences in the classroom instead of berating teachers for tasks that have not been completed; be strong enough to take criticism from parents, but act in the best interest of the teachers and students; be understanding of reflective teachers who are committed to life-long learning; and remain open to the opinions of others and solicit buy-in of their faculty and staffs. Kim recognized that her ideas for school leaders (teaching in the classroom) may not be a reality because “I know they can’t do that because of the things that are laid down on them” (I1,231-232/1.21.07). The suggestions of the participants are realistic. If we are instructional leaders, we cannot retreat to our offices when we realize that the teachers and students need us. The day to day operation of the school necessitates that we complete certain documentation, and we have other internal and external matters that impact our day, but we should never be too busy to interact with our stakeholders. Cheryl, Amber, and Elle mentioned that they would like to see fearless leaders, and I think that is a trait that all leaders should possess. School leaders have become a fearful group who are intimidated and threatened by the thought of parents who may report us to the district office that we often become cowardly lions without hearts ourselves. Urban schools must have tough leaders who place the needs of their faculty, staffs, and students first regardless who is angered by the decisions that we make.

America is a capitalist society stratified by class. If the one of the goals of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) is achieved for all students across this country every child will meet the state standards in reading and math at the conclusion of the 2013-2014 school year. Our school district requests that we set SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, timely) goals when developing our school improvement plan, but two letters of the acronym are absent from the goals of NCLB – “A” (attainable) and “R” (realistic). Some schools have diverse populations consisting of one or more of the following groups: non-English speakers, low-performing students, economically disadvantaged, and students with exceptionalities (special education). I do not believe every student who receives free or reduced lunch will be low-performing, but many of the students who attend Grant Elementary fit into both categories. If student records document that these subgroups perform poorly on formative and summative assessments, how does the government expect that they will score at acceptable levels in six years? Education is punishing children who are already behind with the threat of retention at grades three, five, and eight. The sanctions do not end in middle school. High school students who do not pass the Georgia High School Graduation Test will not receive their diplomas, and seven years ago, the valedictorian of a large, urban school system could not march with her class because she did not pass the science portion of the test. Education is full of catchy phrases that are supposed to motivate educators such as “we must lower the ceiling and raise the floor” and “all of our children must compete on a level playing field.” As federal and state departments are raising the floor and lowering the ceiling, our marginalized students are getting suffocated in the middle. I also would like to know when was the last time government officials have taken a good look at some of the fields

of urban schools. Kozol (1991) brought the disparities of poor, urban and rural districts to our attention in *Savage Inequalities*, but very little has changed in many of these schools in 16 years. I asked many questions during the course of this study, but I would like to pose my final question to those in charge of education at the federal and state levels: Are *your* goals data driven?

Final Reflections

Faith played a major role in the participants' lives. Faith in our forefathers who died in an attempt to read, faith in one another as family who share a common bond of race, faith in God who called each one of us to teach, and faith in ourselves as torchbearers "the teacher sets the match, and it's time for the students to make the fire" (Cheryl/12,307-308/8.2.2007). Faith, from this perspective, is not just our belief in a higher power that governs our lives, but belief that we can somehow, against all odds (laws, administrators, policies, parents, etc.) lead students into the promised land.

The participants and I took an historic journey as we traversed into uncharted territory by establishing the one of the first teacher study groups designed for female, African-American teachers. This decision, I later learned, placed the participants in a precarious position. European-American teachers approached various members of the group asking them what were doing, how they were selected, and what our conversations involved. I don't know how I could have presented my selection process more clearly to the staff. One of the European-American teachers expressed her willingness to participate, and I talked to her personally and explained that the study would be limited to African-American teachers. Since she expressed an interest in participating (and is also a doctoral candidate), I asked her to be my peer reviewer who would ensure that I remained

unbiased and fair in writing up the study. During final data collection I found out that she and other White teachers were questioning the participants, and this was very disconcerting. I did not want to breach the trust that the participants in the teacher study group had in me by approaching these teachers; therefore, I remained silent (which is evidence of my growth as a leader) with Maya Angelou's (1978) *And Still I Rise* resonating in my head. Were excluded teachers intimidated by our coming together in the teacher study group? Angelou's questions, "Does my sassiness upset you?" "Did you want to see me broken?" "Does my haughtiness offend you?" (p. 13) led me to believe that White teachers (who are the minority in our school) became nervous when they realized that a group of Black teachers and I were talking behind closed doors (RJ/7.21.07). I almost shouted when I read Tatum's (1997) commentary on this same issue in her book "*Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*" *And Other Conversations About Race*. She details the uneasiness of White adults who see Black co-workers eating and conversing in the corporate cafeteria. Tatum claims that viewing the interactions of Blacks in this environment makes Whites "self-conscious about being White in a way that they were not before" (p. 89), and "the White person wonders, 'Am I being excluded? Are they talking about us? Are my own racial stereotypes and perhaps racial fears being stimulated?'" (p. 89). Reading this excerpt from Tatum's work helped me realize that the behavior of the White teachers at my school was not indicative to that particular group of teachers – White people would probably be uneasy regardless of the setting where our study group took place.

I also thought about how Black teachers and administrators who interact with Black children are sometimes torn between what state departments of education says is

appropriate for teaching and learning and what they *know* is most suitable for them.

W.E.B. DuBois understood that our Blackness and mere existence in this country causes internal unrest in African-Americans:

It's a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (DuBois, 2006, p. 3)

DuBois first published these words in 1903 as he commented on the innermost thoughts and feelings of African-Americans in *The Souls of Black Folk*. This book was written during a period in history marred with racial tension and turmoil in America. DuBois' continuous battle with rival African-American educator Booker T. Washington began the dialogue about the purpose of educating Blacks in America. On January 29, 2007, nine African-American teachers continued this discussion and discovered that like DuBois, they were faced with their own set of contradictions. Should pedagogy for African-American students solely be comprised of isolated skills that will enable them to demonstrate proficiency on federally and state-mandated assessments or should our sense of moral purpose and social responsibility (to our ancestors and posterity) dictate that we produce life-long learners and overshadow the demand to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)? That question lingered during the final study group session; however, I used my positional power as one of the instructional leaders of the school to encourage the teachers to make a choice. Each member of the group was challenged to decide whether or not she would “follow the yellow brick road” or “ease on down the road” because the future of African-American students was contingent on the path she chose.

The teacher study group provided the participants with a forum where we could temporarily shed our “two-ness” and be Black educators who proclaimed our love of teaching Black children by “any means necessary.” Absent from the group were the shrouds of being politically correct in both speech and actions. Also absent was dishonesty. We laughed, we cried, we recommended, and we questioned – the purpose of our group became apparent to us and was embedded in the word *we*. We discovered that our success as a school was dependent on everyone in that room, and the teacher study group put us closer to finding solutions together that remained unsolved when we depended on our individual resources for answers. Discussing the profiles and pedagogies of the teachers in *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children* allowed and encouraged all of us to take advantage of the opportunity to critically examine race, teaching and leadership practices, and ourselves through a professional learning activity that was designed with our needs in mind.

As our school looks to the future, the participants have asked for permission to continue our conversations and extend this opportunity to other members of our school community. I have given them the autonomy to decide how others will be included; however, the participants felt that dialogue (such as that which took place during the study) needs to permeate throughout the school building. Who knows what might happen if every teacher in our building decides to implement culturally relevant pedagogy into their classroom? The journey to find The Wiz began with Dorothy and her dog Toto. As she walked down the yellow brick road, she met Scarecrow and they decided that they would ease on down the yellow path together. As they met Tin Man and Lion at different junctures along the way, they encouraged those characters to join them by saying, “Come

on, ease on down the road.” I hope that the teachers who participated in this study group extend (and their colleagues accept) an invitation to utilize culturally relevant professional development to improve academic achievement. The participants’ excitement about the teacher study group has spread to two other schools. Three of our teachers transferred to a new school that was built and have approached their principal about starting a group at their school. Amber’s mother, who teaches at another school within the district, felt Amber’s enthusiasm and purchased a personal copy of *Dreamkeepers*. After mother and daughter read the book together, she also introduced the text to her principal and colleagues.

This chapter began with a quote from Diana Ross, Dorothy in *The Wiz*. She and the other characters in the movie discovered that they internalized the perceptions of others and allowed outside influences to define who they were and the path that they would choose. Dorothy’s ruby red slippers were her way home; Scarecrow could think and was instrumental in defeating Evillene; Tin Man had a heart and rusted when he started to cry; and Lion demonstrated bravery as he told Dorothy that he would sacrifice his life for hers. When I asked the members of the group if they were getting the support to be fulfilled as a teacher (see Appendix G), Elle provided a response that reminded me of the struggle of the characters in *The Wiz*: “I don’t know if I can...if it’s for me to look for fulfillment from my administrators or my coworkers – it’s something that has to come from me, from something I’ve done...” (I1,346-349/1.18.07). Like the movie characters, the nine African-American teachers involved in this study had all of the internal resources to make teaching and learning meaningful for African-American students; they just sought permission and validation from others to continue their efforts without fearing

that they are somehow harming the beautiful, Black children whom they love so much. I am just thankful that they allowed me to join them on their journey of self-discovery as they focus on a brand new day of educating their students:

*Everybody look around, 'cause there's a reason to rejoice you see.
Everybody come out, and let's commence to singing joyfully.
Everybody look up, and feel the hope that we've been waiting for.
Everybody's glad because our silent fear and dread is gone.
Freedom, you see, has got our hearts singing so joyfully.
Just look about; you owe it to yourself to check it out.
Can't you feel a brand new day? (Vandross, 1972)*

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APPENDIX A

Invitation to Participate in the Study

You Are Invited

Grant Elementary School will host the only documented African-American teacher study group in the nation!!!

The study group will discuss ways in which we can help our students academically and support one another professionally. Topics such as NCLB, culturally relevant pedagogy, and teaching methods will be discussed.

You are eligible to participate if you meet the following Criteria:

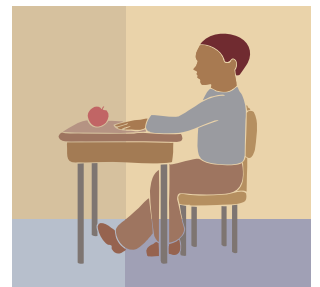
- 1) You are an African-American, female teacher and**
- 2) You have obtained (or are enrolled in a graduate program to obtain) a degree in Educational Leadership**

An informational meeting has been scheduled

Date: December 4, 2006

Time: 3:00 p.m.

Place: Grant Elementary Media Center



APPENDIX B

Letters to Participants Explaining the Study

January 29, 2007

Dear Teacher Study Group Participants,

I would like to personally thank you for your willingness to share in my growth as a graduate student and as a school leader. I wanted to let you know why I am passionate about this study and very interested in the results. I worked with a group of teachers who were concerned about the academic achievement of their African-American students. During the 2003-2004 school year, we had a disproportionate number of male students who were repeatedly referred to my office for discipline. Whenever students wait in my office, I give them some type of academic exercise that they should be able to complete **if** the student is functioning on grade level. I discovered (the teachers already knew) that these students would be “left behind” unless administrators became actively involved in the teaching and learning process.

I found that the teachers were truly in need of instructional assistance. They tried to reach their “hard to teach” students, but their strategies did not seem to work. SST meetings were met with disgust because the committee recommended strategies that had already been unsuccessful. The teachers cried out for help, and it was my obligation, as their instructional leader, to help them. After taking a summer course at Georgia State University, I was introduced to *The Skin that We Speak* edited by Lisa Delpit and Joanne Kilgore Dowdy. This book transformed the way that I felt about myself as a learner and the way that I perceived the children who had given teachers so much trouble. I decided to form a voluntary teacher study group with those persons who were interested in strategizing with their colleagues.

The conversations not only benefited the teachers in addressing the needs of their respective classrooms, but we all learned more about one another personally and professionally. As a result, kindergarten teachers began sharing strategies with fifth-grade teachers, the discovery teacher gave everyone tips on challenging our gifted students, my relationships with the teachers improved in a positive manner, and the students were the benefactors of teachers who believed in them and encouraged them to believe in themselves.

Teachers in this building have expressed some of the same concerns for their students to me, and I want to determine if collaboration is a viable method to assist African-American teachers with dealing with the multitude of demands that education and the public place on them. As a result of your participation, I hope that you discover that “thing” which will give you “the energy to teach” and lead the next generation of African-American students and teachers.

APPENDIX C

Georgia State University
Department of Middle-Secondary Education and Instructional Technology

Teacher Information and Informed Consent

Title: *Culturally Relevant Professional Development: An Examination of Race, Practice, and Self through an African-American Teacher Study Group*

Principal Investigator: Dr. Dana L. Fox

Student Principal Investigator: Charnita V. West

Faculty Adviser: Dr. Dana L. Fox, Department of Middle-Secondary Education and Instructional Technology

I. Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a voluntary research study. The purpose of the study is to investigate how the implementation of a teacher study group supports African-American teachers' sense of self-efficacy, their conceptions of literacy, their teaching of literacy, and their own professional growth. You are invited to participate because you are a female, African-American teacher at Grant Elementary School who is interested in educational leadership. A total of 10 participants will be recruited for this study. Participation will require approximately 15 clock hours of your time from December, 2006 – May, 2007.

II. Procedures

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to speak with other teachers assigned to Grant Elementary School and myself concerning your attitudes and perceptions of educating African-American students. You will be asked to complete a *Participant Information Questionnaire*; participate in group discussions which will be audio and videotaped; complete a series of interviews (two will be individual and one will be in the form of a focus group with other participants); and allow me to observe your teaching methods in the classroom. All individual and focus group interviews will be audiotaped and all study group sessions will be videotaped. Classroom visits will be documented through the use of a researcher's journal in which I will write my observations of classroom instruction. All teacher study group sessions will occur at

Grant Elementary School twice per month over the course of five (5) months (10 study group meetings total), and each meeting will last one (1) hour. A commitment of two hours per month is needed from each participant for the study group, and individual and focus group interviews will take an additional four (4) hours [1½ hours for each individual interview and one (1) hour for the focus group]. I will spend approximately one (1) hour in each of your classrooms throughout the study. Each participant will also be asked to keep a journal in which you may write down questions for the group, your personal reflections, reactions from the readings, or any other information that you feel that will be pertinent to the group's discussion. Participation in this study is voluntary, and you will not receive monetary compensation for your time.

III. Risks

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.

IV. Benefits

Participation in this study may benefit you personally as you collaborate with colleagues in order to develop methods that will improve your instruction of African-American students. Overall, we will focus on gaining information about developing and implementing culturally-relevant pedagogy. Each participant will receive one (1) professional learning unit (PLU) from the school district that can be credited toward the hours needed in order to renew your teaching certificate.

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Participation in research is voluntary. You have the right to not be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to discontinue your participation, all data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be used in the final report.

VI. Confidentiality

I will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. I will use pseudonyms to de-identify all data which includes your name and the name of the school where the study will take place. Focus group interviews will limit the confidentiality of your answers; however, the guidelines concerning the teacher study group that states that you agree to keep the comments of other participants confidential will apply to interviews as well. I will be the only person who will have access to the information you provide. Raw data (i.e., questionnaires, transcriptions, video and audio tapes, etc.) will be stored in a locked cabinet and all transcriptions, reports, and other data will be typed/entered on firewall-protected computers. The code sheet(s) that list(s) your actual name and pseudonym will be stored in a separate locked cabinet from the data in order to protect your privacy. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when I present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally. Please be aware that all video and audio tapes and the code sheet(s) will be destroyed five years from the completion of the study (projected date: May 2012).

VII. Contact

If you have questions about this study, you may contact me at (678) 676-3502 or by e-mail charnita_v_west@fc.dekalb.k12.ga.us. You may also contact Dr. Dana L. Fox at dfox@gsu.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this research study, you may contact Susan Vogtner in the Office of Research Integrity at 404-463-0674 or svogtner1@gsu.edu.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject

I will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you agree to be videotaped during this study, please initial here: _____

If you agree to be audiotaped during this study, please initial here: _____

If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please sign below.

Participant

Date

Principal Investigator

Date

APPENDIX D

Participant Demographic Questionnaire

Name:

Age:

Birthplace (city and state):

Race:

Marital Status

Gender:

Education:

Degrees earned:	BA or BS	College/University:
	MA or MS	College/University:
	Ed.S.	College/University:
	Ph.D. or Ed.D.	College/University:

Certification Field(s):

Number of Years Teaching:

Grade Level(s)/Subject(s) Taught:

School Committees and Role on the Committee (i.e., chairperson, co-chairperson, etc)

Professional Organizations:

Social/Community Organizations:

APPENDIX E

TEACHER STUDY GROUP MEETING DATES ALL MEETINGS WILL OCCUR FROM 3:00 pm - 4:00 pm

Dates	Assignment	Location
January 29, 2007	Overview of project/Signing of consent forms	Tasha's classroom
February 26, 2007	The Dreamkeepers - Chapter 1; Hilliard chapter	Tasha's classroom
March 5, 2007	The Dreamkeepers - Chapter 2	Tasha's classroom
March 26, 2007	The Dreamkeepers - Chapter 3	Tasha's classroom
April 9, 2007	The Dreamkeepers - Chapter 4	Karen's classroom
April 16, 2007	The Dreamkeepers - Chapter 5	Amber's classroom
April 23, 2007	<p>Sharing Success</p> <p>Bring in a sample of one of your student's work in reading/writing. You may either share pieces from a student who has experienced academic growth under your tutelage <u>OR</u> you may bring in the work of a student who is experiencing difficulty with literacy activities (We will brainstorm strategies as a group.) Make 10 copies of each piece and delete the student's name.</p>	Tasha's classroom
May 7, 2007	The Dreamkeepers - Chapter 6	Tasha's classroom
May 15, 2007	The Dreamkeepers - Chapter 7	Tasha's classroom
May 21, 2007	Focus Group Interview	Tasha's classroom

APPENDIX F

Teacher Study Group Attendance

	Jan 29	Feb 26	March 5	March 26	April 9	April 16	April 23	May 7	May 15	May 21
Tina	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Holly	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Amber	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Kim	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Elle		X	X		X	X		X		X
Tasha	X	X		X			X	X	X	X
Mandy	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Cheryl		X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Karen	X	X	X		X	X	X		X	X

APPENDIX G

Interview One

1. Will you talk about yourself as a teacher?
2. How would you describe your teaching practice or methods?
3. Why did you become a teacher?
4. Why did you become a teacher at this school?
5. How do you think that your teaching can be supported by Grant Elementary School?
6. How do you think that your teaching of African-American students can be supported by the school district?
7. How do you presently seek out ways to improve your teaching?
8. Talk about the professional development provided by the county.
9. Talk about the professional development provided by the school.
10. What kinds of topics should be discussed in a teacher study group? Why do these topics interest you?
11. What kinds of topics should be discussed in a teacher study group dealing with improving the achievement of African-American students? Why?
12. How does *No Child Left Behind* impact your instruction of African-American students?

13. Why did you decide to join this teacher study group?
14. How do you feel about my participation in the teacher study group with you?
15. Describe the leadership at Grant Elementary School. Describe your relationship with the administrators at Grant Elementary School.
16. What aspect(s) of teaching and learning gives you the greatest satisfaction?
17. What aspect(s) of teaching and learning distress(es) you the most?
18. Are you getting the support that you need to be fulfilled as a teacher?
19. What kind of leadership would you like to see in schools?
20. What kinds of academic experiences do African-American students need in order to participate in the “American Dream”?

APPENDIX H

Focus Group Questions

1. Do you feel like you are a participant in a learning community? Why or Why not?
2. What have you learned as a result of your participation in a teacher study group comprised exclusively of African-American teachers?
3. How has the teacher study group informed your teaching practice?
4. What suggestions would you make for improving an African-American teacher study group?
5. What aspects of the African-American teacher study group do you consider most beneficial? Why?
6. Talk to me about your perceptions of teachers having conversations about student learning?
7. Should administrators be privy to these conversations? Why or Why not?
8. What are your recommendations for improving staff development conducted at the school and district levels?
9. Describe my role in the teacher study group.
10. Describe your role in the teacher study group.
11. How did your participation in the study group inform your views about yourself as a learner?
12. How might the participation of a school administrator assist teachers in their professional growth?

APPENDIX I

Interview Two

1. Talk about your family and your childhood. You may talk about your brothers and sisters or anyone else who has influenced your life.
2. What social class would best describe your family? Do you feel that you teach students who resemble you from a socioeconomic standpoint? How do relate to these students who may be similar to/dissimilar from you?
3. What emphasis did your parents place on education? Do you think that this aspect of your life is beneficial to your teaching? Why? Why not?
4. Talk about your early academic experiences with reading. Do you think that this has impacted your teaching?
5. Many of us chose education as a second career. Was your first career education? If not, what was your first profession?
6. How do you feel about integrating culturally relevant pedagogy into your classroom instruction?
7. How would you share techniques and strategies that you have learned with your colleagues?
8. What would you like for other educators to know about teaching African-American students?
9. What would you like for other educators to know about implementing teacher study groups at their schools?

10. What kinds of leadership would you like to see?
11. How can administrators assist you in your growth and development as a teacher? Is this different from the kinds of leadership that exists now?
12. If you were to devise a curriculum for African-American students, what would it look like?
13. What support would you put in place for teachers in order to implement your curriculum effectively?
14. What should teachers of African-American students know about their learning, home life, language, etc. that would result in positive student outcomes?
15. Do you believe that a discrepancy exists between what you want to teach and how you are able to teach? What do you do to close the gap?
16. Talk to me about your perceptions of the teacher study group. You may include information that was included in your reflection journal, conversations that you have had outside of the study group, etc.
17. When I observed your classroom, I saw...(I described activities observed during the research period). Tell me about how you feel about yourself as a teacher when your students respond this way.
18. Do you have any concluding thoughts or comments?